



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

Speaker: We're just going to sit here and engage in conversation. These afternoon sessions, as many of you know, were designed to be exchanges, conversations, seminars, with a visiting author, and an opportunity to just carry on some conversation and ask questions. Sometimes we move into a larger space, and I was just saying to Bernardine as we were coming over here that we had intended it to be as small as possible, and now I'm glad we have this space because I'm glad to see so many of you show up. Thank you.

For those of you who are just becoming familiar with Bernardine Evaristo, I'm going to tell you she's a writer of some true measure and talent. She comes to us from England where she has won numerous awards for her two books, which are both novels set in verse form. We tried desperately (in our offices) to find *Lara*. It is unfortunately not available in the States, and it is difficult to import, a situation, which I hope, will soon be rectified. It is exceptional. It won numerous prizes as well, I'm sure, *The Emperor's Babe*. A thoroughly remarkable book, unlike anything that I can think of or even imagine. It's a true act of imaginative endeavor. What Bernardine Evaristo has done there is taken us back to Roman Britain, a time before the English claimed the land. It is a story about a woman who becomes the mistress of the emperor. It is at all times lively, at times very sexy, at times very funny, and very slicing and witty. I think what we'll do here is engage Bernardine in conversation on just how that work came together, because that's its own story and I think she tells it better than I could by highlights.

Please join me in welcoming Bernardine Evaristo. This will be largely for you; I'll prompt you with questions. What we'll do of course is talk for a little bit and then open questions to the audience and try to engage in as much of a conversation as we can. Also I reiterate for those of you not aware, the books at the rear of the hall are available for sale. Talk with us for a little bit about the genesis of the book, which I think, is fascinating, because we were talking about this a little bit before.

Evaristo: The book began when I had a writer's residency at the Museum of London in 1999. I was part of a greater scheme called Poetry Places, and The Poetry Society of Great Britain got a half million pounds, which is probably about \$750,000, to put poets in unusual places. It was a two-year scheme. They put poets in all sorts of places all over the country. There was one in a chip shop, there was one in a tattoo parlor, there was one in a law firm, there was one in Marks & Spencer Supermarket, they were all over the place. There was one with a football club; there was one on the train. The idea was to bring poetry to places where they wouldn't normally be particularly interested in poetry. They asked me if I wanted a residency, and I said, "Yes, I'd like to do something at the Museum of London."

The Museum of London is actually the biggest city museum in the world, which means it's the biggest museum devoted to a city. It's all about the history of London, going back to pre-history, up to the present day. It's a fantastic museum; it's at the Barbican, in the center of the city. They have recreated different parts of London through the different periods. So they have, for example, a Roman gallery. The Roman gallery is made up of rooms that have been recreated, having to do with Roman society. They have a Roman living room, a Roman kitchen, lots of different Roman workshops, and they have a model of the Roman City. For those of you who don't know--because we're all usually taught Roman history in the UK, I don't know if you're taught it here--the Romans occupied Britain for 400 years. So up until about the fifth century AD, most of Britain was run by the Romans, and the language spoken was Latin. So they were like the colonists, and in fact, many hundreds of years later, the British colonists used that as a model when they colonized a third of the world, as they did in the 17th and 18th centuries.

My job as poet in residence was to write some poems if I felt like it, run some creative writing workshops, just a few, and to be inspired by the museum. I was very inspired by the Roman gallery. Although I had studied and been very interested in history at school, I had forgotten most of it. In fact, I've forgotten most of everything that I learned in school. Much to my shame, I really wish I could remember it. But I remember walking around the Roman galleries. Roman society was sophisticated in many ways, and the rooms are always like rooms that you could see in parts of the world today. The kitchen was full of things that you could see in a kitchen today. The workshops were like workshops all over the world today. I found this fascinating, because it brought back to me how advanced Roman society had been.

What I wanted to do at the museum was to write some poems about the black history of London, and black people had been present in the UK for at least 1,800 years. Very few people know that fact. So I thought it would be a good idea to create a character that lived in Roman London. So I created a character that was born in the city 1800 years ago, but her parents came from ancient Nubia. They came from a part of ancient Nubia, which was Northern Sudan, and they sailed up the River Nile, they traveled across Europe on the Roman roads, they settled in Roman London, and she was born there. It began with a poem about this character. She was called Claudia to begin with, which was a very Roman name, but then later on I changed her name to Zuleika. I changed it because my goddaughter is called Zuleika and I think it's a beautiful name, and it is a kind of Middle-Eastern, North African name, it's got kind of Arabic connotations. So it's quite conceivable, almost, that it could have been a name from ancient Nubia. It means "the magnificent one". As a writer, the naming of your characters is very important. Zuleika also has a lovely poetic quality to it. So I called her Zuleika. I wrote a poem about her dying. I didn't know how she died, but I just wrote a poem about me, the poet, coming into her life from the 20th century and seeing her dying. That poem became, for those of you who have read it, the last poem in the book. That became the epilogue, although it changed a lot before it became the epilogue. So that's it, it was one poem. So then I thought, "Well why don't I write a few more poems," because there's so much to write about the Roman period, because it was so well documented. So I started to write a few more poems, and eventually that grew into a novel in verse. So that was the genesis of the book.

Speaker: OK. We also talked about your training as an actress, your background in theatre. There is one thing that we were talking about before that I really wanted to get back to, to refine the distinction further. You were talking about acting versus performance, which is something that you rather resent being identified at times as a performance poet, a designation that we also have in the States, and between performance and reading. It's almost as though there's a three-part. Acting, performance poetry, which is somewhere in the vague middle, and then reading. You had begun to distinguish this whole notion of acting as opposed to performance, which maybe you can reiterate. But I'm also keen to know how you look at reading as distinct from performance, because I think I'm very much with you on it, but I want to hear how you say it.

Evaristo: OK. Because I was an actress, I do see a strong distinction between acting and performance poetry. As an actor, what you do is you try to inhabit other characters, and you give

100 percent to that. You learn your lines; you do not get up on stage and read your lines from a script. It's very much about trying to become somebody else. You use all the skills that you've learned or been taught to do that. A performance poet, certainly the ones I've seen, and I've seen many and read with many, is somebody who reads their own lines and brings a certain performance quality to it. But they're very rarely inhabiting another character, and they very rarely have the performance skill an actor will have, simply because they haven't had the experience or training. You get that experience and training either in the drama school, which is usually the case in the UK, especially if you're working in theatre, or they haven't had the experience of working on several scripts as actors do. I think what I'm saying is, as an actor, you have to be fully equipped to do that; as a performance poet, almost anybody can get up, read their poetry, put some life into it, with or without their script in their hand, and it's acceptable as performance poetry.

The reason I don't like most performance poetry is not because I'm a purist, because I don't think I am. It's simply because I find that a lot of the text of performance poets doesn't have a lot of depth to it, or a lot of craft involved, and when you put that work onto the page, it becomes very bland and empty. A friend of mine, who lives in New York, said that he once went to a performance poetry event in Brooklyn somewhere, and he said he started reading from the white pages, and everybody loved it, because of the way he was reading it. But actually he was just reading names and addresses from the white pages. In the UK, especially if you're a black writer, and if you put a lot into the reading of your work, you're very easily labeled a performance poet. The foremost black writer in the UK, who is a performance poet, if you look at his work on the page it's very weak. Actually, to be contentious, I know there's been some controversy about a review of Maya Angelou's books. Maya Angelou could stand up and read an essay about neuroscience, and it would be absolutely riveting, simply because she is such a powerful presence and she is so good at translating words into performance. What I do is, because I have a theatre background, I draw a very big distinction between what I do as a writer and what I did in theatre, and what I do in performance poetry, so when I write, I write for my work to be read. I want my work to be read for a very long time. It's very important that it works on the page. So I don't write for performance, I write for the page, and I draw a very big distinction between that, because it's so easy for people to label me otherwise when they hear me reading from my work. Because I have a theatre background, I know the difference between what I do, which is reading from the page, and sometimes putting on voices to do the characters that I've written, and actually giving a proper theatre performance.

Speaker: There's one more thing that I wanted to address with you, and then we can open it to questions and conversation even further. As I had said before, in our conversation with Edward Schwarzschild too, I was deeply impressed with what you had to say about the importance of African-American women writers in your growth as a writer, and I'd like for you to talk about that a little bit more.

Evaristo: I grew up in London in the '60s and '70s, and certainly when I was at school, there were absolutely no books on the reading list that in any way reflected my experience as a black child growing up in the UK. Those books simply were not there, they weren't taught in schools, and they were hardly in the libraries. That's not to say that black books hadn't been published in the UK, they had; but they hadn't gotten a lot of attention. Then what happened was, in the late '70s, early '80s, the African American literary scene burst onto the British literature scene. Some of the writers are very prominent, like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Rosa Guy, and Maya Angelou, who were then published by UK publishing houses in huge numbers. They got a lot of critical attention. Basically the books that we were taught in school were books by DWEMs. I'm sure you know that; Dead White European Males. It was very rare to be taught a book written by a woman apart from Jane Austen. So having come out of the education system where there were absolutely no books that reflected any part of my cultural background, the 1980s, when there was suddenly this explosion of really fantastic literature from African American, and in particular women writers, was astonishing for my generation of writers.

It was the first time we were reading books by black women, and some of the books were absolutely brilliant, and they were ground-breaking books. So we kind of latched on to that, and were deeply inspired by a lot of African-American women writers. But in a sense, there was a down side to that. The publishers published books that had already been published in the US, and had made their mark. So they weren't really investing in these African American women writers, because they'd already shown that there was a market for their work. So the publishers were saying that there was no market for black British fiction. I know several writers who had their early manuscripts rejected by publishers who said there was no market for black British fiction. What they were saying was, "If you're black and you're British, and you write fiction, the only people who are going to read your books are black British people." Which is crap, of course, because in the UK if you make it as a writer you have to reach a very wide audience because we're such a small minority. It was also an invalidation of ourselves in the culture, because they were saying that what we had to say wasn't important to the wider audience out there. That persisted for many years, and there were almost no novels published by black British writers, and by that I tend to mean, people who grew up in the UK. Occasionally somebody might come over from the Caribbean or Africa, and they might be published, but they were often writing about the countries they came from, they weren't writing about the experience of growing up in the UK. So it was very disempowering and invalidating. So what had been a very powerful force in our lives then became something that was holding us back. It wasn't really until the early 1990s that publishers started to publish black British writers en masse, and of course showed that there was actually a huge market for our work. But it was really the African American women writers who helped us to dream big and to write our own stories in the beginning.

Speaker: It also astonishes me, the cultural level of denial. You were talking about the homogenized society, as though this was a brand new phenomenon. This is one way to talk about the book, it's fascinating as a mirror to our time. It's also a very effective commentary on class, race, and culture, nicely framed in a story. I just want to draw people in. Maybe I can just get a feel for how many people are familiar with the book, and it's not too many. It's more than a handful. Let me just throw it to the floor, and it's always a situation where there's that awkward silence, so I'll let that awkward silence stay until people start wanting to talk, and then you'll be talking in a torrent.

Someone asked a question about major influences.

Evaristo: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which I still think is her strongest book, was a major influence. She made a huge impact in the UK with that book. It was published by the Woman's Press, which probably means that the so-called mainstream press didn't want to publish it. It had a huge following among women readers. Toni Morrison, who I think is an astounding novelist, was a big influence. Gloria Naylor, who doesn't seem to get the attention that the others do, was also a big influence. I was talking about Maya Angelou, I do actually think that her autobiography is great, but I still rate her as a poet. I enjoy her work very much. Also a writer called Michelle Cliff, who nobody seems to know. She's from the Caribbean and has lived in America for a long time. At that time she was writing about the experience of growing up in a colonial Jamaican society. Those are the main ones.

There are no right or wrong questions.

Speaker:

Evaristo: Not really. I didn't grow up in a household that had lots of books, but I went to the library a lot. I couldn't afford to buy books, but I went and borrowed books a lot. It's interesting, actually, because the two things that I loved as a child, reading and theatre, both have to do with inhabiting other worlds and creating other worlds, and they are very similar in that respect. I liked English at school; that was always my favorite subject. I hated the sciences or anything to do with that side of the brain. Anything to do with the imagination I liked. I didn't shine at school in any way. I wasn't considered one of the best people in English literature. In fact, I took an A-level in English

literature, which is the exam you take when your 18, and I got an E. A is the top grade, so I failed dismally. It was really when I went to drama school to train to be an actress that I started to write. I started to write for theatre. But some writers say that they wrote their first novel when they were five. They do, some of them. It varies for every person. People come at it from different angles. I know that you've got a lot of programs in creative writing here now, but to be honest, most of the people who I know, who are novelists in the UK, didn't come up through that route, simply because those schools weren't around. People became criminals. A couple of writers I know have actually done time inside. Another one was a graphic designer, another one studied law. People seem to come at it from different angles and somehow end up being novelists or poets.

Speaker: When did you decide to get into theatre?

Evaristo: I went to a youth theatre from the age of 12, and that was my main social activity, and probably when I was about 13 or 14 I decided that was what I wanted to do, and then I went to drama school when I was 19.

Speaker: And that got you out of theatre.

Evaristo: Yeah, then they kick the shit out of you, basically, in drama school. They kind of break down your defense system so that you can access your emotions, but they don't always do a very good job of building you up. Also, because you become very technical in your performance, you sometimes lose that initial passion that you had for it.

Speaker: How did you transition from theatre into writing.

Evaristo: I think I never really loved acting after I left drama school. I hated getting up on stage and having to expose myself in front of hundreds of people. I never enjoyed it, and I never relaxed on stage, so I eventually stopped doing it. Then when my first book came out I realized I had to get back up there and do this kind of thing, which was really very frightening for me. I suppose I must have developed stage fright, because there was an 8-year gap between acting and my first book coming out. As a writer you've got to get out there and do readings, especially in poetry, because my first book was just a poetry book. You have to get out there and sell yourself, and read your work in such a way that people will be interested in it. The first few readings I did were dire, I kind of looked down at the page and didn't want to look up at anybody. Then eventually I got into the swing of it.

Speaker: How did you fall into poetry?

Evaristo: That's how it happened actually, I fell into it. I really did fall into it. I started writing for theatre when I was at drama school, and the theatre that I wrote looks like poetry on the page. I don't know why that happened, it just happened. It seemed as if poetry was in me and it was determined to come out, and it did. I didn't have a great love of poetry when I was growing up, I liked novels. Do you know Dylan Thomas? He's a poet, and he wrote a wonderful radio drama called *Under Milkwood*. I played Captain Cat in the school play, and I loved it because it's all done through poetry. It's a very good drama told through poetry. The language is beautiful. He recreates this little fishing village in Wales in the 1930s or 1940s. In a sense, when I think about it now, he was also a model for me, doing the kind of work that I do, which is telling stories through poetry, and sometimes there's a dramatic element to it.

Speaker: I was going to ask if you'd be willing, not to steal thunder from this evening's presentation, but to read something brief. I want to take this question and then maybe go to that.

In what point in your development of the novel did you decide that Zuleika was going to be a poet?

Evaristo: Interesting. You read it? You know, I can't remember. It must have happened quite

organically. I don't really remember when that happened. Ah! It didn't happen at the beginning of the novel. It happened maybe about a third of the way through. What happens is if you have an idea later in the book you have to sow seeds for it earlier, so then I had to go back and sow seeds for the fact that she's interested in being a poet. Zuleika is a poet, but she's a very bad poet. Basically she's married off to this rich Roman when she's 11 years old, as Roman girls were. She has no say in the matter. He's three times her age. She could have a very miserable life, but she has these two great friends, Alba, who's a bit of a girl about town, and Venus, who is a drag queen and runs a drag bar called Mount Venus. So she's got these two great friendships, but she's not allowed to work; Roman women weren't allowed to work. So she has very little in her life. She wants to make her mark. So what I wanted to do was to give her an ambition to make her mark in society. Originally she wanted to be an artist, to create things with mosaics, but she's not allowed to do that. Her husband's always away on business in Rome and other parts of the Roman world, so she then decides that poetry is going to be the thing. He educates her. He brings in a teacher. So she's also becoming educated, and she's learning about the Roman poets, and the Greek tragedies, and she finds it all very boring. She says to her dad at one point, "I want to know about now, I want to know about extramarital relationships and men dressing up as women, this is what I want to know about in my society." So then she decides that perhaps she's the person to write about these sorts of things.

Speaker: She says at one time, "Learning one alphabet in one's life is enough."

Evaristo: Yes, because her teacher tries to teach her Greek. She says, "Learning one alphabet in a lifetime is enough, actually." Then she has a performance poetry party towards the end of the book, which is really supposed to be a showcase for her. That's also a comment on the poetry scene in the UK. She gets up there and recites a poem and she dies on the spot.

Speaker: Did you mean to write the whole novel in her voice, or did it just turn out that way in the end.

Evaristo: You can read that into it, if you want to. Because it is her telling her life story, and it's told through poetry, except it's not the poetry that she would have written. If it was, it would be really bad.

Speaker: We're going to stop to just get some voice. I just thought it would be interesting to hear Bernardine, and then we'll come back.

Evaristo: It's all told through her voice, and it's told through couplets. The language is also peppered with Roman, but you'll probably understand most of it, because it's Roman that is most like to contemporary English. Not the bit that I'm going to read, but it's also got a lot of contemporary American slang in it. In actual fact it's a real mix of lots of different slangs and languages. Nearly everything is completely understandable. This is the prologue, and it introduces the character, Zuleika. It's called "Amo Amas Amat". When you learn Latin at school, the first thing you learn is "Amo, Amas, Amat": "I love, you love, he, she, it loves."

Who do you love? Who *do* you love,
when the man you married goes off

for months on end, quelling rebellions
at the frontiers, or playing hot-shot senator in Rome;

his flashy villa on the Palatine Hill, home
to another woman, I hear,

one who has borne him offspring.
My days are spent roaming this house,

its vast mosaic walls full of the scenes on Olympus,
for my husband loves melodrama.

They say his mistress is an actress,
a flaxen-Fraulein type, from Germania Superior.

Oh, everyone envied me, *Illa Bella Negreeta!*
born in the back of a shop on Gracechurch Street,

who got hitched to a Roman nobleman,
whose parents sailed out of Khartoum on a barge,

no burnished throne, no poop of beaten gold,
but packed with vomiting brats

and cows releasing warm turds
on to their bare feet. Thus perfumed,

they made it to Londinium on a donkey,
with only a thin purse and a fat dream.

Here in the drizzle of this wild west town
Dad wandered the streets looking for work,

but there was no room at the inn,
so he set up shop on the kerb

and sold sweet cakes which Mum made.
(He's told me this story a mille times.)

Now he owns several shops, selling everything
from vino to shoes, veggies to tools,

and he employs all sorts to work in them,
a Syrian, a Tunisian, Jew, Persian,

hopefuls just off the olive barge from Gaul,
in fact anyone who'll work for pebbles.

When Felix came after me, Dad was in ecstasy,
father-in-law to Lucius Aurelius Felix, no less.

I was spotted at the baths of Cheapside,
just budding, and my fate was sealed

by a man thrice my age and thrice my girth,
all at sweet eleven - even then Dad

thought I was getting past it.
Then I was sent off to a snooty Roman bitch

called Clarissa for decorum classes,
learnt how to talk, eat and fart,

how to get my amo amas amat right, and ditch
my second-generation plebby creole.

Zuleika accepta est.

Zuleika delicata est.

Zuleika bloody goody-two shoes est.

But I dreamt of creating mosaics,
of remaking my town with bright stones and glass.

But no! Numquam! It's not allowed.
Sure, Felix brings me presents, when he deigns

to come west. I've had Chinese silk, a marble
figurine from Turkey, gold earrings

shaped like dolphins, and I have the deepest
fondness for my husband, of course,

sort of, though he spills over me like dough
and I'm tempted to call Cook mid coitus

to come trim his sides so that he fits me.
Then it's puff and *Ciao, baby!*

Solitudoh, solitudee, solitudargh!

Speaker: Wonderful. Worth it coming this evening on that one. Question?

I wanted to know what kind of trials and obstacles you had making the transition from actor to writer, and how long did it take to write the book? And how do you overcome that, the negativity, when people were telling you no, what if you can't do it (writing)?

Evaristo: Very few people will say, "No, you should stay with acting." Because acting is a masochistic profession to be in, simply because in the UK, something like 95 percent of actors are out of work at any one time. So I didn't really get pressure like that from anybody. The transition was a slow one. I stopped acting, but I still worked in theatre, managing a theatre company, and I wrote poetry. Over a period of about eight years, I then got together my first collection. As for people telling me not to do something, that will always make me want to do it. You just cannot listen to anybody's negativity when they throw it at you. What poets in England would say to me in conversation, and they love moaning, poets especially, is "You can't earn a living through writing poetry." This is the mantra you hear all the time. If you look at that logically, you'd probably agree with that. Not enough people buy poetry books. But I have a sort of mindset that I've developed over the years, which is if you want to do something you'll do it. So I continued to write poetry but actually I told stories through my poetry. And although this is sold as a novel, and in the UK they've

got "A Novel" written over the pocket, in a way they're kind of kidding people, because if you look at it it's actually poetry. So what I've done is, actually I have made money through being a poet, but I've just kind of diversified in a different way, while still staying true to what I want to do. So being an actor is no easier than being a novelist. The thing about being a novelist is that you don't have to wait for anyone to give you work in order to do it. You may have to wait for a publisher to publish it, but you can do it anywhere and anytime. An actor needs material to work with, and a company to employ them.

Speaker: How long did it take to write them (the books)?

Evaristo: This (*The Emperor's Babe*) took about 18 months. My second book, which is also a novel in verse, *Lara*, took five years, but that's because I wrote it as a prose novel and then transformed it into poetry. So it was three years and then two years. The first poetry collection spans a period of about ten years.

Speaker: I see that you've dedicated the book to your father. Did he influence any of your characters?

Evaristo: In this one, no, not at all. But you know, your parents, for good or for worse, they influence you. They make you who you are.

Speaker: Why did you decide to revamp your first novel from prose to poetry?

Evaristo: Because it was my first attempt at prose, and I hated it. It didn't excite me at all, because my background had been in writing poetry, whether for theatre or for the page. With poetry you refine something, you experiment and explore language. You use imagery. You can do all those things in a novel, I know that now, but I had it in my head that if I was going to write a novel it would be written in quite plain prose, which isn't natural for me. To me, the language was dead. There wasn't one interesting image in the whole 200 pages, which is probably about two-thirds of the book. So I had to throw it away. Structurally it was a complete mess as well.

Speaker: In terms of revitalizing language, you had mentioned cockney rhyming slang, which I don't know how many people know about that. It's one of the most fascinating things, especially to an American looking at the British use of language from a distance. Can you talk about that?

Evaristo: Cockney rhyming slang comes from the East End of London. You can get cockney rhyming slang dictionaries. They're not very thick, but it's a language that's evolved, that is very unique. Let me try and remember some. It probably came from market store traders; that's probably where it originated. Jewelry is tomfoolery. So you would say, "Oh, let me look at your tomfoolery." Trouble and strife is for wife. "So how's your trouble and strife?" meaning "How's your wife?" And it's done with the cockney accent.

Speaker: Can you say something about the new novel, where it's set and how it was writing in prose?

Evaristo: It was a challenge, because it was working with a different form. But whereas when I'd written *Lara* as a novel, I thought I should write to some kind of formula, which I wasn't very successful at doing, with the new novel, which is a prose novel, I decided to do it my own way. In the years in between, I developed the confidence to experiment with the novel form, having written two novels in verse in between. It was hard to do it, because there are so many more words that you're dealing with. It's probably two-thirds more words than a novel in verse. If you look at this, that's a lot less words than you'd get on the page with a novel. Maybe two-thirds, maybe one-half, I'm not sure. Also, because there were so many words, (93,000 in the first draft, but it's been greatly reduced thanks to my editor), it also then became this huge kind of monster that I had to try

and look at subjectively, so I could look at how it worked or didn't work structurally. So that was also very challenging.

Also, the novel itself, the story that I've chosen to write about, was also not an easy one to write. It's about two people who in 1988 decide to drive from London to Australia, it's a journey I took with a very mad friend. We decided to drive down to India, and then try to take ferries to Australia. Although this novel, which is called *Soul Tourists*, isn't about the friendship I had with my friend, it is about that journey. It's about two people who decide to drive from London to Australia, and along the way they live in Spain and Turkey. One of the characters, Stanley, is this young man. He's a banker, he works in the city of London. He's had very little experience of life. He has access to ghosts, so he has what is called a gift. All these ghosts from European history, who are people of color, come into his life. I think there are about eight of them. So there's this car journey across Europe, the relationship between Stanley and Jessie, and it's also about European history and all these ghosts coming into his life and transforming his experience of the journey, and also him.

Speaker: An excellent adventure, yes.

What is the title of the book then?

Evaristo: *Soul Tourists*. S-o-u-l. I think it's coming out in May.

Speaker: That soon then? So it's in process, with the publisher. Great, you can come back.

You have a very good sense of character. Did you have a sense of them in your mind before you wrote the books, or as you were writing the book did you conceive of them in your mind?

Evaristo: Writing is a magical process, and sometimes you don't quite know how you arrive at certain decisions, and how characters are created. With *The Emperor's Babe*, with Zuleika, I decided she would be young, she would be feisty, that she would have a hard life, but that she would be triumphant in her own little world. And, she would be flawed. You have to have characters that are flawed, because that's what makes them interesting, that's true to life. With Venus, the drag queen, I don't really remember how she emerged into the story. She wasn't really modeled on anybody that I know. I knew that the emperor was going to come into the story, so I did research on him, and got a bit of a sense of his personality. And then you start writing, and the personality comes through the writing. I don't know how different writers work, maybe some people do have their characters mapped out in advance, and others just work more intuitively.

Speaker: Tell us something about writing the sex parts of it, which are at points over the top, and at other points just exotic. Did you just get into a roll with it and just carry it wherever it would take you?

Evaristo: The thing is, there was a lot of sex in *The Emperor's Babe*, but it's also a way that Zuleika expresses herself through the book. She's married to this horrible old man, basically, in her eyes, and how she feels about him is expressed through their love-making. With the emperor, he is master of all he surveys, he is emperor of the Roman Empire, which is god knows how many people, it spreads over 9,000 km. So there's this vast empire that he's in control of. He can have her killed with the wink of an eye. She's in a relationship with him, and she's completely powerless. The only way that she can have any power is through trying to dominate him sexually, which is what I had her do. Because there's no other way that she could dominate him. She's his mistress for a short period of time. Those are the two main bits. Also there's a section where they're making love for the first time, which is slightly sado masochistic, but it's also an analogy for the Roman Empire. So it's not just about them making love, it kind of touches on wider things having to do with

domination and empire. So the sex in the book isn't just there gratuitously. It serves a function in terms of character development, and also in terms of what's being said about the Romans and the Empire, and about empires generally.

Speaker: But it's still sex.

Evaristo: You know, it's part of our lives, and there's a lot of prudishness that goes on. All of a sudden two people get into bed and waves start crashing against the shore, and that's sex, which is what it used to be like. Writers didn't write about it. Well it's part of our lives and I don't see why we shouldn't write it to explore aspects of our lives.

Speaker: What is your muse? What gives you your drive, or your creativity?

Evaristo: Well, my starting point was to write the stories that weren't told, that hadn't been told in British society, through literature, through film, through television. It had to do with filling in the gaps that weren't there. In a sense, that's still my drive. I'm very interested in the black presence in Britain, and in Europe, and also African history. Because of my upbringing, because I grew up essentially as an outsider in the society that I grew up in, that's what formed me--wanting to make an intervention. So that is my drive, that is fundamentally my drive. It's very nice if you make money and you get published and everything else, but that's not why I got into it.

Speaker: I was wondering about the Poet Placement program. Did you do that for a long time?

Evaristo: No, it was just for two years. But writers do residencies all over the country, but it wasn't in such a huge way and such an intense way.

Speaker: I want to come back to that issue of what I'll call allegory for the sake of conversation. I want to ask you how much it's conscious at any given point in the composition of the work that you start finding all of the sudden, "Wow, this is working on a number of levels, more than I had expected," and then you chose to prop that up.

Evaristo: I think that's what happens with poetry, really, which is in part the joy of writing it in poetry. When poetry really works, it works on different levels. Imagery does that, for example, because an image is resonant in a way that language that doesn't have imagery isn't. So what happened was I would then discover parallels between Roman society and contemporary society, and if that seemed to resonate in some way, then I would develop it and become more conscious of it. The sex scene, where it's about empire and domination, etc, that's something that just happens organically. I didn't sit down and say, "Well I'm going to have them having sex, but it's really going to be about the empire." It just happens, because those are the kind of thoughts that were in my mind and they get processed in that way. The performance poetry scene, I can't really remember how that evolved. I suppose it comes to me like an idea, "Oh that would be fun." Oh I know. I was reading about the Romans. They did have these performances. People would stand up and read for five hours from something that they'd written, and everybody would be bored and they'd be talking amongst each other. So when I read that, I probably thought, "Oh, yeah. It's a bit like going to some of these poetry events where people go on and on forever and everybody gets bored."

Speaker: I find that whole issue of the allegory fascinating. There are some writers, especially in highly politicized climates or countries, who can write relationships that reflect politics. I think of one Israeli writer, Amos Oz, who could write a story about a man and a woman in some kind of a relationship which can't be out there for more than thirty seconds before we discover that the man is really Israel and the woman is really Palestine. There's a way in which you can kind of go with that, still keep the story as part of your original design, and hit on those levels for the readership who wants to find that. Sometimes I think it's phenomenal that you don't have to think that much

about it, because, as you say, the joy of poetry is that it does just happen. That's the magic of language too. We'll take a couple more questions that then we'll wrap.

Evaristo: The UK has changed a lot in the last 20 years. There are about four million people of color in the UK in a population of sixty million, so we're still a very small minority. There were even less when I was there, and most black people or Asian people were located in certain cities around the country, especially in London. Up until recently a lot of black people wouldn't even go to the countryside, let alone live there. I think that's changed a lot in the last ten years. There was a lot of overt racism, as well as subtle racism. I experienced more of the subtle racism, but there was a lot of overt racism and hostility towards the immigrants who came to the UK after World War II. They were invited by the British government because of the men who had died in World War II, so they needed them for the work force. When they came, and once the economy stabilized, people said, "You must go home, we don't want you here." My father arrived in 1949, and his generation couldn't find anywhere to live. They used to have signs outside boarding houses that said something like, "No dogs, no Irish, no blacks." That was commonplace. So people would group and live together in certain parts of the city where they could find accommodation. It was very hard to find work. A lot of the immigrants who came over were highly qualified people, people with Ph.D.s who ended up being postmen or cab drivers or working on the buses or working in the nursing industry. So they came into a very hostile environment.

I'm what's called the second generation. I'm the child of an immigrant. My father was Nigerian, my mother's English. So I was also from a mixed race family. A lot of the Africans who came over did have white wives, because they came over on their own. Not many African women came over in the early years, whereas in the Caribbean a lot of women came over, and the men came over. The men might work in the transport system and the women might be nurses or domestics or something like that. At the school I went to, I was the only black child out of 500 kids for some time. I was very isolated in one sense, although I didn't feel it so much because I wasn't really aware of racial issues. The racism that I experienced was on a much more subtle level. In other parts of the country, and other parts of London, where there were bigger groupings of black people, the racism was very overt. There was a lot of violence and bullying, etc. There were race riots and all sorts of things. It was a difficult time for people.

What's happened in the last twenty years is that the second generation sees Britain as our country, our home. We're not going anywhere, we don't see a homeland that we have to go to, and some of us do go to our parents' countries and decide that we'd actually prefer to live in Britain. We kind of put down roots in Britain, and we are more like the British. We have very British accents, we've been through the British education system. It's much easier for us to be assimilated. The society has changed, especially with the labor government and their image or the new, multicultural Britain, which is true for the cities. It's not so true for the countryside. There are 300 languages spoken in the greater London area. It's also an incredibly racially integrated city. As a writer, I've traveled to many countries, and its (London) a model for interracial relationships. Fifty percent of the black men in the UK have white partners. Twenty-five percent of black women have white partners. A lot of children are of mixed race. If I walk around my area of London, which is Notting Hill, and I see a white woman with a white child, I do a double take. Which is so funny, because often they have a black child. People are seeing each other as people, and they're mixing across the barriers.

But we don't have the same history of segregation that was so recent in your society. So I think you have much bigger obstacles to overcome. So we're now much better represented. Not very well represented in government, or at management levels, but better represented in the media and in the various arts industries, for example. So it's a very changing society and slowly it's changing for the better. If there is racial violence, and it still exists, it tends to get a lot of attention because

people are lulled into the sense of the country not being racist anymore. Of course it is. So when the occasional really terrible tragic murder happens, as it does from time to time, there is a lot of concern, and a lot of controversy over it, because it kind of jogs everybody's sense of safety about Britain having changed. What's happened is the media's changed, the cities have changed, but not everybody in those cities have changed. The countryside is better than it used to be, but it's still a different experience going out into the countryside than it is living in a city, for example.

Speaker: You talk a lot about race and racism. Can you explain that in regards to your book and your characters?

Evaristo: It varies from book to book. *The Emperor's Babe* is set in Roman London, and from all of the research that I did, the Romans weren't racist. They were very prejudiced against various groups of people, like the Barbarians, who were always trying to get at them, but there wasn't actually anti-black racism amongst the Romans. So in the world that Zuleika lives in, she is noted for her difference, but she is not persecuted because she is black. I guess for anybody growing up in the 20th century that's quite strange, to think about that--that actually racism isn't a normal part of human nature. I think tribalism is, but not racism. She's growing up in a world where her color is not a problem, basically. With *Lara*, which is the other book, which is based on my family history, it's about a mixed marriage in the 1950s, and all the racism that they encounter because of that. Also, some of the racism that one of their children encounters as she grows up in London. So it's put onto the microscope more in *Lara* than it is in this book. This is really about re-exploring British history.

Speaker: Well listen, thank you very much. I want to encourage you all to come this evening. You got a sample of what I think will be an excellent reading this evening, which will take place at the Recital Hall at 8:00pm. So join us then, take advantage of the books available for sale, and join me in thanking Bernardine. That was a wonderful presentation. I assume too, you'll take some time if people wanted to get books signed?

Evaristo: Yeah.

Transcribed by Kelley Conroy