



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Diana Evans

(music)

The Amplify Project, Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper. And I'm Pauline Walker. We created the Amplify Project so we could talk to writers for the stage, page and screen, about their lives, work and artistic practice. We've really enjoyed these conversations, we hope you enjoy listening to them. (music) We recorded this podcast in three different locations and at times during our conversation you may hear the gentle murmur of traffic, we hope that it doesn't distract you.

Her work has been described as complex, clever and seamlessly achieved. Her prose is air bound and exhilarating. Her writing is ruthlessly funny. Diana Evans is the award winning best-selling author of three novels, *26a*, *The Wonder* and *Ordinary People* and she's here with us today.

**Patricia Cumper** Diana, welcome to the amplify project.

**Diana Evans** Thank you very much.

**Pauline Walker** So I'll kick off with the first question. So could you tell us about the young Diana? The things in your family, your school, your social life that you think hinted at the writer that you were going to become.

**DE** Well, I didn't have the quintessential writer's childhood of a house full of books or artistic parents, although I did have a very creative grandfather in Nigeria, he was a tailor. But I think the signs are more to do with the way I reacted and responded to the world, I was a very sensitive child and I always felt things very deeply. I was also very quiet, I was very good at writing at school, they always commented on my writing. But I think that the first moment that I can remember where I felt that I might have a writer in me, always very passionate reader was when I was about 15 and I read *The Magus* by John Fowles and I was sitting in my bedroom for almost an entire weekend reading this one book and I was just totally amazed by the ability of this novel to transport me to another place and keep me there. And I thought then that I would like to do or to have the power to do that, to create the similar experience for somebody else. I had a very interesting family as well. My mother's Nigerian, my father was from the North in Yorkshire, and I didn't really know my father's side of the family very well. Both my parents had quite strong personalities so it was a childhood full of opposites and dichotomies, cultural dichotomies, and I think that all impacted on who I've become as a writer.

**PC** Yeah. I'm also mixed race and so I understand because I had a Jamaican mother and an English father, that business of being told that you have one skin two fuse what I was told, too sensitive for people listening? But this is what fascinates me, you were a dancer which means I think from what little I understand, that's a really strong relationship with your body and how it expresses itself, and then you've become a writer which is very much about looking out, isn't it, observing the world, capturing what's out there. Was there a link between the two of them for you? Is there something about the creative process involved that links stuff in any way?

**DE** Well, I think it's a desire to express some energy that you feel within you, wanting to express and project something outwards and... Writing is a very...of course, it's a very sedentary activity and dancing is the complete opposite but when I'm writing I'm always striving for a sense of physicality in...I want the writing to feel very robust and it is a kind of movement inside, and I'm always reaching for changes and movements when I'm writing, especially when I'm working on a novel like chapter changes, and the way one section moves onto another section and how that works, it's almost like a literary choreography, I'm interested in the patterns that you can make inside a novel. And I think both writing and dancing are to do with wanting to make a form of...out of something that's very wild and free and creative, I think that's the ultimate challenge of it, of both disciplines, is to create a form and pattern out of something that's very free.

**PC** Yes, I understand that very well.

**PW** You also work as a journalist, so I just wondered how do you balance those two writing careers?

**DE** Well, it's quite difficult because I think I have a...I have both a journalist and a fiction writer in me. The fiction writing side is very kind of esoteric and it's difficult to marry with everyday life because it has this mysteriousness to it, whereas the journalism is very solid and factual and grounded, you have deadlines and you have a certain framework of writing, and you have a word count, and I like the aspect of journalism but I also like the freedom of fiction writing. I think one craves the other, they both need each other, like when I'm working on a piece of fiction, I'll get to a point where I feel this desperate desire to do some journalism just because of the solidity of it, and it's kind of comforting. So I try and keep them both going, it's difficult to work on both journalism and fiction at the same time, so usually if I'm working on an article, I have to completely stop working on the novel, and that can cause a lot of anxiety because novels require complete containment and immersion in the world that you're writing about. So I managed to do both somehow and I probably always will, I think I've realised now that about myself that I do need to do both rather than try to make a decision that I have to stop doing the journalism which is something that I thought for a long time that it would somehow reflect in my fictional writing. I don't believe that anymore, I think they actually help one another.

**PW** Mm-hmm. They feed off each other really don't they?

**DE** Yes, they do.

**PC** I think a lot of writers are sort of like magpies, they collect characters and incidents and stories, lovely shiny ones, and then put them in their stories, so that you can see the sort of balance between the two. I'm curious, when did you start writing fiction? Because that fascinates me, at what age did you actually make that leap into to doing something completely fictional?

**DE** Well, I was in my 20s and I had been trying to write fiction from the age of around...of my early 20s, 22, 23. Before that I was writing poetry, and so I started out as a...I started out as a poet, poetry came very naturally to me, that was how my thoughts fell onto the page, then I started to feel that poetry...although I really loved playing with the language and experimenting with what language could do, I felt that the form was too small and so I wanted to try on a larger canvas. And working in journalism, I felt restricted also in the sense that it was too...it was too formulated and I didn't want to write in a certain style or to certain word counts, so that's when I started to try to write fiction. And I had been working on short stories for a few years and hadn't really...I hadn't really written anything that I felt that had arrived at who I was or my voice, I hadn't found my voice yet, it wasn't until I started working on my novel *26a*, that's when I really got closer to finding my voice .

**PW** So how did you find your agent for *26a*? So you started writing it, so how did you find your agent?

**DE** Well, I did the MA in creative writing at UEA, the University of East Anglia, and that's where I finished my first book *26a*. And while I was there, there was...they called it an agent's tea party where they had a load of agents come to meet the writers on the course, I think they have it at a lot of different creative writing programmes because agents are always looking for new writers and whatever the next big debut also is going to be, so they gravitated to the MA creative writing courses, so that's where I met my...at least somebody from my agency, I got a few cards. You had to kind of sit down and sell your book and talk about the book you are working on which is quite terrifying actually but I did come away with a few connections and eventually sent out the first three chapters of *26a* to this agency. I sent it out to three or four agencies at the same time, and a couple of them came back and said, "We're interested but we want to change this, this or that." And I didn't agree with what they wanted to change. And then I got a couple of rejections, one or two rejections and I finally went with the agent who was interested in the novel and also had the same kind of vision that I had, who didn't want me to change too much basically, who agreed with me... what I thought it was.

**PC** (overlapping conversation) make sense, yeah.

**DE** Yes

**PW** Yeah. I mean, that's really... So what would you say is the most important thing in your relationship with your agent apart from them not wanting to really change your work for that first novel?

**DE** Yeah, I think it's them having a sense of what it is about your writing and your work, and your subject matter that is important and transferrable to the public, to readership, so them having a sense of who you are and really understanding what you're trying to do. I think it's also really important that you, the writer, also have a very strong sense of who you are because I think that can get lost sometimes when a writer is at the beginning of their career. I think if you listen too closely or act too readily on advice from outside, whether it's an agent or an editor without being very connected to what you really believe the truth is...of your work is, I think that can be quite dangerous so, it's about having an agent who understands who you are and what you're trying to do but also you being very connected to your own kind of creative essence.

**PC** Yeah. This is something Pauline and I talk about a lot. When do you declare to the world that you're a writer? Both of us have written but it's almost like a commitment, isn't it, when you say you're a writer, and there's some responsibilities perhaps that go with taking on a writing career, would you agree with that?

**DE** Yes, yeah, I would. I mean, it's only when I finished my third book, Ordinary People that I really felt like I could call myself a writer because (overlapping conversation)-

**PC** (overlapping conversation) not just us, yes, yeah.

**DE** No, it's not. I think there's still a lot of missed about what it is to be a writer, it's this very sort of lauded occupation, and I think our default position is that I can't do that, I think most of us feel that, and...but with each book, even though I start out thinking I can't do this, once I actually do it, I learn again and again that it's to do with really nuts and bolts, and very practical matters of sitting down on a regular basis and committing to the project and staying in the room when it feels difficult, and having a commitment to making this vision that you have of this story materialise even though it's very, very hard work. I think that's all that being a writer requires is that sense of commitment, deep commitment to the work of it and to the mechanics of it, and having...that means having faith in what you're trying to do.

**PW** So how do you build that commitment to writing? Is it a discipline for regular writing? Did you find out what's the best time of day for you to write? How did you organise yourself to become the writer that you wanted to be?

**DE** Well, I treat it as a job. I remember having a conversation with somebody once who was of the opinion that writing was not a job, and it wasn't work, but it definitely is, and I do think of it as a job and I do have to have a sense of regularity when I'm writing, when I'm working on a novel, to keep the momentum going because I think particularly with the novels, it's very easy to get waylaid or to get lost and I think the regularity and the momentum is really the most important thing. It really is about just sitting down and making yourself do it. It's often difficult, I often struggle when I'm writing and feel like I'm never going to finish it or it's too unwieldy, the whole idea is a mess, it's never going to come together. And I usually feel like that right up until very near the end, with all three books that has been the case. But I think the more you do it, the more your faith deepens that actually it is possible, you just have to commit to it and accept that it's going to be really hard.

**PW** Is it because...because all three of your novels...you don't write the story in a linear way, you're back and forth with different characters and the different scenes that are in there, different timeframes, so is that why it feels kind of unwieldy to you?

**DE** Yeah, so there's...I like to have a...I like to have lots of characters in my novels, I like it to feel like it's peopled by lots of different personalities and identities and spirits, I like to have a rich spiritual presence, and that means often having lots of different lives interplaying and entangled with one another. And I think that's why it's so hard to pull off. I do have that desire to have movement and so I do enjoy the chopping and changing of time zones and jumping into different characters' lives but it means that when you want it to build some kind of coherence, it's hard, you don't know when it's actually going to feel like it's coherent and, yeah, I sometimes wish that I was... I had an easier approach to my work and I could just write more simply but that's just not who I am I think as a writer and I've gradually come to accept that because I need things in the novel to keep me interested because they take a lot of time, so you need to fill it with things that you're interested in and characters that you love, and music and I like putting different art forms in my novels and pushing the boundaries of what can be in a novel and that takes a lot of mess.

**PC** Yes. See, when I was reading it, I think what struck me immediately is that there's a kind of sort of very quiet subversive energy in your writing because all the characters claim a space which is kind of British middle class but they don't justify, they don't explain themselves, they move between the riches of the city and rhythms of Railton Road, and they could switch in a way that I completely recognise. So am I right, is this something that you're doing deliberately, creating this space for characters? So they're not...? What's the right word? They're not the usual black characters in some ways, you've created a whole different space and I really enjoy reading it.

**DE** Mm, thank you. Yeah, that's the whole point for me is I think that's one of the things initially that made me want to write fiction. I wanted to encapsulate these deeply felt experiences that I've had but I wanted to do it in the context of blackness and almost as a retaliation against the misrepresentation of blackness and the whole invisibility and absence of blackness in the way things are represented in a truthful way in our culture, I felt that that was just so absent and so I feel like I'm trying to create a space where blackness is just ordinary, that's why *Ordinary People* is called that because I think of the sense of blackness as ordinary, it's quite an uncharted area in British fiction, definitely, I want to write about that black characters in a very kind of nonchalant way with an indifference to all of the loaded politicisation of blackness that we live with every day, and that is projected onto our lives every day, even from within. So I want to write an awareness of that, that at the same time to attempt to almost cast it off so that these characters can just live their lives as ordinary people.

**PC** Yeah, absolutely. And that comes across so completely but here's the thing, and again this is a discussion Pauline and I have had a lot, when you're a black writer, because so often people try to find categories and put them in to, when you're a black writer, and is that a label that you accept or reject, or how does that work for you?

**DE** Yeah, I mean, I've seen books where a writer is called a black writer and I always find it quite reductive and a little bit funny as well because I am black and I'm a writer, I'm both of those things, so I'm always a black writer and I have no objection whatsoever to being called a black writer. It's just when the term is used from a point of ignorance or from the standpoint of blackness being something that is outside the mainstream because for me blackness is mainstream, that is my life, that is my family, that's my community. I don't think of blackness is something that's outside of things or something that's other but that is the way it's projected onto us from the mainstream outside of us, so, I don't accept that label from that standpoint of ignorance but I also wear it with pride when blackness is thought of in a mainstream context.

**PC** Absolutely. I would say amen to that. (chuckles)

**DE** (chuckles)

**PW** We're going to hear an excerpt now from *26a*. So there are many themes running throughout the novel two of which are about identity and belonging and they're really brought into sharp focus when the British born twins, Georgia and Bessy are taken to live in Nigeria where their mother Aida was born.

**DE** [Reading from *26a*]

**PW** That's such a beautiful, beautiful piece. Tell us why you wanted to explore the themes of identity and belonging, particularly in your first novel?

**DE** Well, it was a theme that emerged once I was inside the character's lives, so, I was writing from inside Georgia and Bessy, and once I realise what the book was actually about, that it was about the relationship between these two twins, I basically just followed them through their lives and at that point when they go to Nigeria that the writing about identity and how they relate to the Nigerian half of themselves, and the sense of belonging they feel to Nigeria and to England. All of that became very relevant to that particular scene, so, I don't think I set out to dissect these particular themes but I think whatever emerges in a character's psyche when I'm writing them in a particular situation then I just follow the writing and where it wants to take me and what places it wants to investigate. I think also that particular experience of being mixed race, half one thing and half another is really interesting way to observe life and to experience life. I've always felt a connection to both places and as a result of that I've also always felt a connection through anywhere, so, that sense of when your belonging is not quite fixed in one place then that means that you could also feel at home or feel a connection to any place. And I find that quite fascinating.

**PW** So, you've written *26a*, it's your first novel, and it gets nominated for a lot of rewards and then you win two prizes, the inaugural Orange Award for new writers and the British Book Awards deciBel Writer of the year. Did that change your life?

**DE** Yeah, I mean, it was...it gave me a certainty of what I was going to do next I guess. I didn't know if I could write another book when I finished *26a*. And I actually got a two-book deal and so I was in a position where I had a deadline for a second book, so I think the awards recognition gave me maybe more confidence that I could, maybe do it again and it made me, I guess more strident in just going forward onto the next novel. It was very validating, I didn't have any expectations of what was going to happen with the book. I just wanted to finish it. That was all I was interested in, I wanted to just finish the book and get it done because it was... It was written as a monument to a member of my family who had passed away, that was the impetus for the book, and I wanted to build a monument to this person. And so that was my objective to just make this thing. And once I'd done that, I was happy, so the awards were like an added bonus I guess to that achievement, it was like a validation from the world, so, but it felt...it felt very encouraging and like I could keep moving forward and that I was somehow going in the right direction.

**PC** Yes. When you're writing it's such an internal process but we do it for external purposes. I mean, we want people to read the stuff, yeah.

**DE** Yeah, yeah, exactly, it definitely gave me broader readerships so it reached more people that way.

**PC** Well, your next novel, *The Wonder* was published in 2010, I don't know why I'm telling you because you know already, but never mind. (chuckles)

**DE** That's okay.

**PC** We're going to do a little reading from it, because at the beginning it's just so evocative and you sort of introduced the reader to the idea of melding the past and the present and how that past can influence a person's present and future.

**DE** [Reading from *The Wonder*]

**PC** In the novel you explore what being creative means, following your dreams, how creativity shapes your life, but there you have some wonderful passages about the act of creating itself, sort of wrapped in with it, that it's never quite what it seems to be, and I just wonder how do you feel when you write? Is that a comfortable place for you to be?

**DE** I actually feel very uncomfortable when I'm writing actually. Yeah, it's quite difficult for me to realise what I'm trying to do, it takes me a long time to kind of work things out, and it means I have to go down lots of blind alleys and write lots of material that I don't necessarily end up using but when I actually reach the place where I feel like I'm in the right place then it's really easy and I can just sit there for days, so, it's kind of a...it's a very conflicted process I think, I often feel like I'm wrestling with something, with *Ordinary People* especially, I felt like I was wrestling with this wild beast and I'm trying to get it to just stay in one place so that I could make it work, and do what I wanted it to do but it was so resistant that, yeah, it was a very exhausting process and it took a long time, seven years, and with each book I always think the last bit was really hard and that was the hardest thing I've ever done, and then the next book ends up being even harder...even harder than that, I'm a bit of a perfectionist so I'm always striving for something that maybe doesn't exist and maybe that is the essence of creativity and maybe that is the essence of creativity, it's a process of letting something be imperfect, and I think it's very true to life in that sense, that we have these expectations of things but actually achieving them means coming down, lessening our expectations and coming down a peg or two and just allowing ourselves to accept what is possible.

**PW** Yeah, that's amazing. We're now going to go onto, just quickly, talk about your...your most recent novel is *Ordinary People* which was published in 2018 and it was very much critically acclaimed again like *26a* and was nominated for the Women's Prize for Fiction, the Rathbones Folio Prize and the Orwell Prize for political fiction, and you actually won the South Bank Sky Arts Awards for literature. So the blurb on the back of the book says, "It's an intimate study of identity and parenthood, sex and grief, friendship, and aging, and the fragile architecture of love." And I absolutely love the phrase "architecture of love" and our next reading shows the demise of a



relationship and I found this really poignant the moment when Melissa realises that this is really the end of her marriage, it's so beautifully expressed.

**DE** [Reading from *Ordinary People*]

**PW** We are living in the most extraordinary of times, so we'd like to know really what do you think the future holds for yourself as a writer, for writers in general and society as a whole.

**DE** Oh, that's a big question.

**PW** I know. (chuckles)

**PC** Yeah. I'm sorry, it's in at the end.

**DE** No, it's fine. No, I completely agree, we do seem to be in a crucial and transformative moment. I think, well, for me personally as a writer, I think I just...I want to just follow my own path and stay true to that and I think if I do that I will write more books and better books, I don't think I've reached the place, yeah, that I'm aiming for. I think I still got a long way to go. And I think for writers as a whole, I do think the times that we're living in, it does impose a greater responsibility on us to address issues in our writing. I definitely feel that, that writers are important sound pieces, and that it's our job. Well, I've always felt this actually that it's our job to document experience and to document social political events so that we can look back years from now and know what it was like to live in that moment. And also look back on the things that we were doing at that time to make the world better. I think writing is a social tool and I've always felt very strongly that I want to use my writing to do something good and it has to have some kind of social purpose to it, and I think that's on all of us now even more so.

**PC** I get the final question and the best question, naturally, what are the best things about being Diana Evans?

**DE** I find that question quite difficult as well. So I was asking people the same question. But my instinctive response is the best thing is being able to live a creative life, and to be doing something with my life that feels very...that feels very true and, right, even though it's difficult, I would rather be doing something that feels very true than doing something else that was easier.

**PC** That's perfect, thank you. And thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us.

Excerpts in this podcast were read by **Sapphire Joy**. Do check with our website: [theamplifyproject.co.uk](http://theamplifyproject.co.uk), for other podcasts in the series and for further information about black British Writing. The Amplify Project is funded by Arts Council England.

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