



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Rachel Long.

Patricia Cumper The Amplify Project. Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper.

Pauline Walker 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.

PC We've really enjoyed these conversations. We hope you enjoy listening to them.

PW In this episode, we're speaking to Rachel Long, whose debut poetry collection *My Darling from the Lions* was published in 2020. T.S. Eliot Prize-winning poet Roger Robinson describes it as, "a delight. It takes melancholic, surprising turns every couple of pages, with poems centred around combating body shame, sex, and faith." *My Darling from the Lions* was shortlisted for the Rathbones Folio Prize, the Costa Poetry Award, Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and the Jhalak Prize. She's the founder of Octavia Poetry Collective, which is based at the Southbank Centre in London. Rachel Long, welcome to the Amplify Project.

Rachel Long Thank you so much, Pauline and Pat. Thank you. It's lovely to be here in this space with you.

PW So I'm going to kick off with the first question. Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood and what part words played?

RL So I was always a big reader. A bedroom-reading kid. So I used to pretend if - if any of my friends from the neighbourhood knocked, I'd pretend that I was sick and I couldn't play out so I could read. A real highlight for me each week was going to the library with my dad, to pick out new books so that I could go back to my room to read, basically. So words were like a massive part, at least the written words. And also you read that beautiful quote by Roger Robinson. And since I write a lot or incorporate faith as a theme in my work - And I - And I do think the more - the more I think about the book now that it's out and it's sort of apart from me in a different way, I do think that going to - to church, and particularly sort of an African-initiated Pentecostal church, and the way that words are used there in sort of - in sort of sermons, how tonal the language is, biblical language, and all - and all the ways that that perhaps even - I might not have been aware of it whilst I was writing, but how all of that is somehow in the work and in the words that I use.

PW So when did you realise that you could write poetry?

RL Badly, I think I've been writing it for forever. I've always been writing terrible poems to boys that I fancied in school, I think. Seriously, and knowing that it was poetry that I was writing, and I really did want to write and study it with purpose was after a workshop with Jean "Binta" Breeze at The Albany in Deptford, which was - It was a workshop run by Renaissance One in Apples and Snakes. And I'd already completed a - a Literature degree. And even up until that point, I was writing prose mostly. And it wasn't - And I had - I came home. I was broke. I couldn't find a job. I was graduating. It was kind of - just had a breakup, very depressed. And - And I - And I really missed that - the - the workshop space. I really missed talking to other people about writing and about reading. And so I saw - I can't remember even where I saw it, but by some providence, I saw there was going to be a workshop happening at The Albany in Deptford, which wasn't so far from where my - where my parents lived, so I could walk there because probably at the time couldn't even afford the bus. And it was going to be run by the dub poet Jean "Binta" Breeze. And I had no idea what dub poetry was. I didn't then know who Jean "Binta" Breeze was. But it looked good. It was for - It was for writers ages 16 to 25 and it was free. And I thought, "I'll go to that and I'll see." And, my gosh, meeting - meeting Jean and being in that workshop with her, I - And the way in which she holds the poem in her body and in her speech, there's no differentiation between - or very little differentiation between her speaking to you and then when she sort of falls into the poem. And I left that workshop thinking, "I want to do that. I want to write poems that sound and feel real, that can reach somebody like that." And I've been trying to since.

PW So when did you first call yourself a poet then?

RL Oh, that took some time. That's - That's I think to do with confidence, impostor syndrome, always thinking that - you know, that - that a poet is not a young Black woman from South East London, that somehow you had to be dead for 400 years and be from Stratford-upon-Avon or something, you know? So I think that that added to how long it took me to really own the fact that I was. And - And for a long time, maybe for about a year or two, I'd say it tentatively to some people and not to others. And now I'm so proud to say it. And it's whenever I - when people are like, "Oh, what do you do?", "I'm a poet." And they say, "What?" And you say, "I'm a poet." And they're like, "Oh, my gosh. That's so cool." Or they think you're having them on. They're like, "Get out of here." You're like, "No, no, it's real. You can be a poet." But I didn't - I didn't think I realised that for - for a very long time.

PC I think the power of poetry is immense. I mean you speak of Jean "Binta" Breeze. She has a poem called "De Simple Tings of Life".

RL Oh, yes.

PC Which is just about her elderly relatives living off the land and the calming nature of nature. And it's a poem that I go back to all the time. Jean was a force of nature. But

poetry has always seemed to me a very sort of really intense and sort of - almost the most difficult of the literary disciplines, like every word has to earn its place. What do you think sets poets apart from, you know, writers of fictions, of drama? Is there something that defines what a poet is?

RL I'm not sure, Pat. I think it's a really – it's, I think it's a really good question. It's also a question that I was sort of quite careful about because I'm also aware that poetry sort of has this reputation for being sort of - sort of - Maybe if it's - is - is - Some people call it like, "Oh, it's the highest art form or -" And - And - But - But in that, I think a lot of people can feel excluded from it, like it's not for them, whether to read it or to - to write it, to be able to talk about it. And I think sometimes that that doesn't help poetry because it can be seen as this thing that's as sort of off or higher, or - So I think - I think about that a lot, like what is the difference between it? Like what does set it - it - not rather apart, but, like, what is the sensibility for poetry? Or what is it that makes it that it's not prose and it's not - it's not playwriting? I think you got to it in the sort of the weighing up of - of every single word. But also any good novelist will do that. Any good playwright will do that, too, or - or should want to, you know?

PC Yes.

RL So I'm not - I'm not sure, but I like not being sure about that, and I will think about that question, like, a lot because it will help me also, I suppose, in my - in my process, like what I understand poetry to be and what it can do.

PC But writing just is endless questions in some ways thinking - thinking you've found the answer, and then the next - you know, the next situation is going to be even better.

RL Exactly.

PW You were shortlisted for the Young Poet Laureate for London in 2014. Did being shortlisted open up any other opportunities for you?

RL Yes, absolutely. I both really loved that process and really hated it. And now I look back on it, I think it was - it was very difficult. And it - And it really did make me, I think, in certain terms, as a - as a poet within the - the particular London scene as well. So through that - through that process, and it really is a process from the sort of the application right through to when - I think it's about - It's a three-month long sort of choosing. And there - that the year 2014 was an all-female shortlist as well, and you go on residencies. And I met Roger Robinson through - through that process. He was one of - He was running one of the master classes. I already knew Jacob Sam-La Rose through a - the - a collective that he was running or a poetry community called Burn After Reading at the time. And he was one of the judges that year. And I also met another master class guest, was Karen McCarthy Woolf. And I - And I mention these people around because I was talking to - to Roger Robinson and Nick Makoha yesterday, actually, about community and about Black writers in community. And I - And it's through meeting - meeting Roger and Karen. And I also think - I think Nick maybe also was a judge that year as well. It's kind of like once you meet these people, just how

many other opportunities can come out. So even if I didn't - I didn't become the Young Poet Laureate that year, that almost didn't matter. I'd also been introduced to so many brilliant and generous poets who did not and still do not forget me, and that means so very much.

PC I've also found that writers - writers who last tend to build structures around themselves, to help themselves and others. And you have founded the Octavia Collective. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

RL Sure. I set up Octavia in 2015, actually. And I - I set Octavia up because - So after the - after the Young Poet Laureate and things like that, I - I started an MA at a certain institution in London, and I was really, really looking forward to it. I had - like I said before, about coming back home after my - after my BA and kind of really missing that space and then saving up, but kind of - And then being able to do it again, especially after the Young Poet Laureate process and doing poetry within, you know - and being part of it, and so then going back into academia. And I was really saddened, disappointed, confused, actually, I think, by the lack of representation and inclusivity of - just kind of creative radicalness as well that - that certain institution does have a reputation for, and that was just kind of not there. And as I said, I was part of - part of another sort of like the London poetry or literary scene, let's call it to make it sound really cool. And talking to other young women, particularly at these events, sort of whilst we were going home. So, you know, after these events, walking to the tube station or something, or in - in the breaks. And so poetry is sort of the - the fire, like why we're there, and then all these other sort of offshoots and conversations that we were having. And a lot of us were sort of also within other institutions as well. And all of our stories, all of our frustrations were scarily similar, if not exactly the same. And I - And there's a lot of - There's lots to be said for having conversations about things, which you can air your frustrations and talk to each other. And there can be healing in that. There is a lot of value in that. But then also I thought this is not enough because we're going to have to go back to sit at lecture the next morning and go through the same kinds of things. And so I thought, how can I create a space that is just for us? Just for the writing, and so that we don't have to deal with all of these other things, like the racism and the sexism and the way that that plays out in academia and also in the expectations or limitations of what we write. How can we do away with all that stuff so that we can just be writers in a room and get rid of all the - all the other distraction and noise?

PW So how does that work practically? Is it - Is it an office space you have? How often do you come together?

RL So we haven't met for a very long time. Not only because of COVID, but it's really hard to keep a collective going for a long time. And - And I think it does need to morph and change, and so I need to be in a space where I sort of need to figure it out. But for four years, we met monthly at the Southbank Centre in London. I approached Bea Colley, who used to work on the literature team there. And I asked her - I told her about my idea, and I - and I said, "Would you - Would you be up for offering space in kind?" And she said yes immediately. And I - And I was really kind of worried about that as - as well because Bea's a

White woman, and I wondered if she would say, “Well, yes, but can it be for women?” or “Why?” or ask me to sort of justify why we felt we needed the space, and she didn’t. She said yes immediately, and so we were given a space in kind, and a really - and really beautiful spaces each month that we met, you know. She didn’t sort of book us the room in the basement with no windows. It was always - always at the top. And anyone who knows the Southbank Centre, it’s a really gorgeous building on of course, the Southbank. But also the - the - like the higher up you get in the building, it is sort of ceiling-to-floor windows and you can just see over the whole of London. And there - It was such a powerful thing for us to be up there, to overlook London in that way, and to write within the context of that and how different then that space was to what we were escaping from, I feel, in many ways. So that’s how it happened practically. And - And it was a space. I set Octavia up so what we could read and we could write and we could converse in peace, basically. That - That was - That was the only thing that it was set up to do. And the - the longer Octavia went on, the more - the more attraction it had, I think. And it also happened at a time where there were more conversations happening culturally about - about race, about - about gender, about class as well, at least within the arts, I felt at that particular time. And so there was more attraction around Octavia. And so we started performing more, and so the space became a little bit more outward-facing than just inward. And I think for a long time that was also a beautiful thing. But the longer that went on, the balance between how much we were doing outwardly facing things rather than still feeding all the in - the inner-facing things just became something that I - I felt that kind of maybe needed to go back to the root a little bit more or again.

PW So talking about going back to the roots, can you tell us something about your writing process in general? And more specifically, how you got the poems together for this collection, *My Darling from the Lions*. And where did the ideas for the poems come from?

RL I - I think everyone says this about their first book or like about their first album or first thing you put out in the world. Like I was always writing this book. By that, I think I mean that these poems or what these poems are about have - are - are about things that I’ve always been concerned with or obsessed with, or have desired or dreamed about. More specifically, how to get them onto the page and my - and my process. I think I need to be very alone, preferably with no one around for days. I think that’s how I write best, which is obviously not very practical, and it’s probably why I also write very slowly, so that I can make that particular space happen. Yeah, I’m not sure. I find that my process is really hard. I probably should document that like a little better, but I - I - I - I don’t. I tell poets that - like poets that I work with to - actually, I have stopped because I felt like a bit of a fraud. But the whole tenet that you must write every day, I tried to stick to that for the longest time, but I know that that doesn’t work for me. I know that I need long periods of time between writing before I can write again. But in that time, I’m - I’m thinking, and I’m having conversations, and I’m reading and reading and reading. And that’s a kind of another sort of way to create the poem before committing it to the page. So I think that’s what my process looks like.

PC Yeah, I've come to the belief, you know, that - that the quiet periods, the thinking periods, the wandering around, looking as though you're staring at the sky is actually writing, you know? People think it's a physical process of putting it down, but that, actually, is so much a part of it.

RL I love that. Yes. That writing's not just a physical process. Thank you (overlapping conversation).

PC But... No, no, no, no. That to me is the end part. That - That's almost a relief. It's - It's the taking it in, and I take little bits of things. I'm like a picker or a magpie. I take things and try and knit them together. So each poet has a sort of slightly different process. We're talking to another poet then, he said that his collection had one poem which was kind of like the backbone, you know? So I wondered, did - Is there a sort of backbone poem for this collection? And if there is - if there is, could you tell us a little bit about where it began and how it finished up?

RL I like that as an idea, like a backbone poem. For me, no. I think... So the collection's in three parts. And I - I think there's maybe a - maybe a - a backbone poem within in each of those three parts for me, maybe if I think of it like that. Most definitely. So, yeah, the first part being is called "Open". I think there's - I think there's a backbone in each section, yes, concerned with different things. So just briefly. So the first section is called "Open", and which is a sequence that repeats throughout that first section, about these first moments of waking up and waking up next to who and how. And I think it's a lot about the body and sex and desire, and also girlhood and the - and - and how all those things sort of interact and play out. And the second section is called "A Lineage of Wigs", and it is about a lineage and about - It really concerns my mother. My mum kind of came into this collection quite unannounced, as she is one to do in my own room when I used to live at home. She's sort of done this in - in the collection. If anyone had said, you'd be writing a book with a whole section on your mother, It drew a lot of the newer poems within the context of the collection and thinking about babies and - and Barbies.

PC I have to say though, I'd read them last night and then I read them again this morning. And the only thing that came to me, which may - may sound a bit strange, is one of the Chagal paintings, where there are disparate elements floating around, but the centre of it is understandable on a kind of - It's not subconscious, it's - I was going to say visceral. It's not quite that. They - You completely understand what the picture is saying, but if you described it to somebody, they wouldn't understand what you were looking at. And your poems are a lot like that for me because there are these moments that just prick me because it's so familiar. And there are others where you juxtapose things that I never would have juxtaposed. It's like, "Oh, okay." So, yeah. Yeah, I just wanted to say (overlapping conversation) me.

RL Thank you, Pat. I love - I love that.

PW I think -

RL I love that, I wanted the- Sorry. I'm sorry, Pauline.

PW Oh, carry on. You say - You say.

RL No, I've wanted a - I've wanted a print of the - Is it "The Green Donkey"? For the longest time as well, so there's something in that.

PC Good.

PW I think we should have our first poem now.

PC Oh, which one would you like to do, Rachel?

RL I think I will read... I might read *Open*. A little tiny bit of *Open*. And then - Just the first one, and then go into "Portent". Is that -

PC Yes, that's lovely.

RL Do you want one of the others? That sound okay?

[RL reads *Open*]

PC Love that.

RL Thank you.

PW How did you find your agent and get the deal with Picador to publish the collection?

RL I... Because I think with poet - within poetry, I think the - there's a slight difference in terms of agent, at least in my experience on - on getting an agent. I think even a - a few years ago, it was quite rare, extremely rare, for a poet to have an agent unless they were also maybe a novelist or writing for TV or stage. And so I - I'm thinking that it might - No. I think in the last couple of years it has - It is sort of a new - a new thing. And so - And because - And because of that - I say that because I - Poetry as a - is - is quite small, or I think it can be quite small, in a good way in that - in that way that that the community is tight, and - and in many ways it can feel very supportive. And so I already - I'd already met Kishani Widyaratna, who used to be at Picador and was at Picador before she just moved to 4th Estate. And because she used to come to lots of poetry events and she was the poetry commissioning editor at Picador. So I already sort of knew of her, like in a friendly way. And my friend also at the same time that I met on my - on my MA doing Creative & Life Writing was represented by Emma Patterson at Aitken Alexander. And so there was a way. And I suppose in a - in a sort of non-traditional way, but also both women are women that I like, which...and admire, but also are super professional, and I know they wouldn't have taken - neither would have taken the book if they didn't actually like it just because I had seen them at certain things or because one already represented my very brilliant friend Elaine Castillo. So it sort of happened. I - I - This sounds a little bit - But quite organically. And I know it's a really annoying thing to say as a - a - to some writers who really have to - that it takes them years to find an agent and a publisher, but I do feel very lucky that I did. But I also waited

until I really, really, really felt that the book was ready before I sent it to - before I asked Kisha if she'd be interested in reading it. I really made sure.

PC It's that thing I - in drama. You know, you always send your fourth draft and then pretend it's your first. Just in case, just in case, you know. But I - I wanted to ask you -

RL I like that.

PC You've been shortlisted for four major prizes. So does - does being shortlisted matter? Does it change how you see yourself, how people see you?

RL Yes. I'm always just very grateful and honoured to be read, to be seen. It does make a difference in terms of attention, in terms of traction, in terms of being invited to feature at or on other things. Absolutely, it does. It makes a difference. It was also quite interesting. I suppose I haven't got anything to compare it to, but it was an interesting experience for - for me at least to be shortlisted for - for these prizes during the lockdown, during the pandemic. Because it happened in a sort of a quiet way, I could enjoy it quietly. Whereas probably in a - a quote-unquote normal year, you'd have to do a lot sort of onstage and there would be these readings, probably, kind of, in lots of different places in London, and there would be audience. And so the way that these happened was that I'd get an email to say that I'd been shortlisted for something. I would then do a little kind of dance in the living room, and then in the evening, pour a glass of wine. But that - that would be it. That would be the way to celebrate, which is exactly my way to celebrate things. So, yeah, it happened in a quiet way, but - but perfect for me.

PC And it looks really good. On - on the TV, people are uncertain of their ability to judge stuff. This reassures them that they're seeing something on - that other people have thought was good.

RL It does.

PC So, yeah, I think that probably - probably is quite helpful.

RL It does. It is. Massively.

PW But with it being your first collection, was there a pressure from the publisher to promote it? So how did you go about promoting it?

RL No, there wasn't. I haven't felt any pressure. I am so - I am really so lucky to have such a brilliant team both at Picador, who published the UK version, and then at Tin House, who have published the US version of the book, which came out last week. And...

PW Congratulations.

RL Oh, thank you, thank you very much. Which is very exciting. But I haven't - No. In short, no, I haven't felt any pressure to - to promote the book in any ways that I am not comfortable with doing. I'm a massive introvert, and I kind of only have Twitter and that's enough for me, you know? And I came up on sort of all social media platforms. And - And if

there is an invite to do something, either it will come to me directly and I can decide if I want to do it, or it will go through Emma Patterson at Aitken Alexander, or it will go through Picador. And - And I've never felt any pressure, actually, to do something because it will look good or it'll be good for the book. I haven't, which I'm very grateful for.

PW And what's the feedback been like from readers and family and friends?

RL So I didn't - I haven't - I kind of didn't tell my mum or dad that the book was coming out.

PC Okay.

RL But then my dad walked into a Waterstones and saw it.

PW And what did he say?

RL And then called me. It was like, "Rach, I'm in Waterstones in Greenwich. I've seen your - I've just seen your book." And I was like, "Oh, I've - I didn't mean not to tell you." And he was just like, "I wondered if it was you, and then I - then I opened it and I read a poem about me, so I - then I - I knew it was you." And I was like, okay dad, erm, I said sorry and I sort of said why. My dad is very - He's - He's a - He's very understanding, a gentleman. So I - I was just like, "I just - I was going to tell you. I just didn't... (overlapping conversation) About waiting for the right time." I - Yes, my - yes. Very much so, in their way.

PC Yes, yes. Families all have their own systems of appreciation and approval.

RL Exactly. And that will keep you grounded. You can be in any shortlist or win any prize you like and there will always be a comment that only your mother can make.

PW So you mentioned Jacob Sam-La Rose before, and I know that you worked with him as a co-tutor on the Barbican Young Poets programme. Can you tell us a little bit about that and what your work entails?

RL We've just gone through the applications of this year's Barbican Young Poets, so I'm very excited and very much in the midst of the - the - the - the process. So I've worked with Jacob as his co-tutor on the - No, assistant tutor. His assistant, really. He does most of the backflips in - in - in that space and I - and I assist him and support where I can. I've worked with Jacob on that programme for - It will be - This will be the sixth year. Jacob was another person for me as a - as an early-career poet who - Absolutely I have Jacob to thank for so much and just what he does for the community with - with his work, particularly with young poets in this country is - is - is just incredible. And so it's a real - Yeah, it's a real honour to just be with him, to learn from him on that programme, and really feel supported also as a - as a tutor learning from one of the best. So - So we get usually anything between two to five hundred applications for young poets -

PC Wow, that's (overlapping conversation)

RL By young - Anything from, from, it's a lot, it's a lot. 16 - And it used to be 16 to 25. This year it's changed, which is I think a brilliant and a - and a really welcome thing. It's

something that Jacob and I were pushing for for years, which is it's now 16 to 30. And I can see so many other programmes doing that as well, kind of really trying to extend what - what we mean when we say young. And then there's programmes doing even, you know, much more in terms of "Let's kind of do away with age restrictions" because what does that mean, really, in a literary space? So the way that Barbican Young Poets work is that when we've whittled down all those applications, then we have recruitment evenings. We meet the poets. We get them all in a room. We see kind of how they interact with each other because it's not just about the - the - It's not just about the poems, and it's not just about the performance or how good their poems will be in - in the anthology that gets produced at the end, but also how they can also be - how they can make and create a community with each other as well. It's the six-month programme. It's fortnightly at, of course, the Barbican. And it sort of culminates with an anthology and with a performance on - on the Barbican stage. And just some of the best young poets in this country have - have - are - are Barbican alumni. And I met, actually, kind of, so many of the - of the members of Octavia through my work with Barbican Young Poets. And before that, the - the other poetry community that Jacob ran, which is Burn After Reading. So I just think it's really beautiful that how we can - how one person shaping a community around them can feed and influence other people building communities as well.

PC And that leads us very nicely to the next reading. And I'm going to ask you, please, Miss, would you read *Communion* for us?

RL That will be a delight.

[RL Reads *Communion*]

PC Sorry, that's just so accurate and so hilarious, I can't tell you. Hair salons in Brixton. And I was just getting a cut. No, I - I love that one, I have to say, but it -

RL Yeah.

PC ... it also leads into the question I want to ask you. And we ask this of all the writers that we're - we're speaking to. Do you think of yourself as a Black writer? And when somebody describes you as a Black writer, what - what does that mean to you?

RL Yes, now. I don't think I always did. I think being a part of Octavia and being within the context of other Black women writers specifically, that helped me see myself as a Black writer also. Yeah, before that, I would have found it quite difficult to be able to - to feel like I - I own that space. I think maybe that's to do with being of mixed heritage. Perhaps that - that - growing up like mixed-race in this was to me the - the identity. I think about this a lot now because the - the language around that has even changed, which is just interesting in how that then maybe influences the language and the space and - and how you see yourself and your work and what context. Also, yeah, being around other Black - other Black writers, reading other Black writers, being exposed to the nuances and the breadth of what and who a Black writer is and can be and can - and can write about, which is basically what - what - everything.

PC Yes, I get very tired of being - Black pain being the thing that we're supposed to write about. And it's kind of like, come on now. We're way more complex than that.

RL Massive, massively. I think - I went to an - an event the other day. It wasn't even a - it wasn't a - it wasn't a poetry event. It was a - it was two - two Black visual artists, actually. And it has - It'd been first event that I'd kind of gone to for - yeah, for ages, maybe in the last 18 months. And what was just really kind of stark and also kind of disappointing was that there's all of the questions that the audience were asking or the - the questions that were even posed by the host to the artist were all about Black pain. They were about grief, they were about mourning. And that this was happening before we all kind of went through a global trauma, you know? That is - I hate that even - yeah, in some way, we've internalised that all, that people in this event had internalised that so that there were no other questions outside of those things. And I sort of made a promise to myself that I would not - that I would not talk to any other Black poet going forward about anything but joy.

PC Amen.

RL And we'll see how - (overlapping conversation) I'll see how that fans out.

PW That's a good thing to do. So how do you make a living as a poet?

RL In different ways that are all around the central thing of the writing. So all of my work all have something to do with poetry. So whether that is teaching or tutoring, whether that is mentoring, whether that is doing readings and performances, whether that is - I'm trying to think what else do I do a lot of? Yeah, those - those are the main three, I think. Through - through - through workshops, through reading and performances, and through mentoring. And they are absolutely still doing everything that I love. And - and to me, in many ways, they - they do feed the work. Again, like working with - with other poets, with reading them, with getting really excited about what is being written right now and being really excited for the future of - of - of poetry in this country. So they are - they are all the ways, as well as - so they are all the ways that I make my living as a poet whilst also - and - and, most centrally, writing, and now the book, and, hopefully, books.

PC Definitely books. Definitely.

RL Yeah.

PW Yeah.

PC We've decided. You don't need to worry about that.

PW Yeah.

PC Would you choose a poem to read as your third and final reading for us?

RL Sure. I was going to read *steve*... I was thinking about it before. But now we've said about Black joy, yeah, I think beating Steve up as the last poem might be a bit...

PC Yes.

RL A bit of a - of a contradiction to... Oh, what shall I read as a last poem? “[inaudible 00:48:41]”, and, actually, yeah, there’s another - there’s another death in that one. I don’t know. Do you know Inua and Yomi? So they - they both hate that poem because they’re like, “How you gotta kill the Nigerian at the end like?”

PC Yes. Yes, I’ve - I’ve (overlapping background noise) probably got told off for that. Could - Are there - How many more “Opens” are there? Would you like to read the other “Opens”? Because I think that would begin and end us in a lovely way.

RL Oh, that’s a really good idea. Yes, I can read three of them. Shall I read three little ones?

PC Yes, please.

RL Let me read the one with my mum. I’ve already mentioned my dearest mother and then this one. And then you mentioned *The Sky*, Pat, so I’m going to read that one.

PC Lovely.

[RL reads]

PC Those are lovely, thank you. It’s the lovely sense of almost the - the - the poet dreading the consequences of their action and everybody saying, “No, no, no, it’s fine,” which is really - it’s just so lovely and reassuring. I get to ask the penultimate question.

RL Oh, okay.

PC We’ve been going through sort of really interesting times. You know, Black Lives Matter, Me Too, COVID-19. So we’re going to ask you to look forward a little bit. First of all, what do you see for yourself in the next decade? And maybe broaden it out a little as to what you think writers face in the next decade or so?

RL I find it very hard to think of future things. I will try my best. I... I hope, and you’ve already said there must be more books, so that’s what I’m going to do, you know, write more books. I’m going to continue to try to find ways to support and build and create communities, particularly for - for Black British poets, particularly for women. I hope - I have a lot of - I don’t know if I think I know what’s going to happen, but I - I hope that we can all learn something from each of the things that you mentioned, Pat, that not only we can - yeah, and truly in the sense of learn, so like actively learn, so like reflect and use and utilise, and then with those things, create from them. I find it really hard to - I don’t know because I think I just despair, basically, and then have to think no, don’t despair, think positively about what this could mean. I’m excited. I am. I am excited about the - the work that we’ll - that will be created. I feel like there’s a new space. When I was talking to Nick Makoha yesterday, he said he can feel a renaissance. He can feel that we’re - we’re living in a renaissance right now of Black British poetry, specifically. And I am excited by that. I’m excited for all the things that that might mean.

PC I think he - I think Nick's right, and I - I can see it in screenwriting. I can see it to the - for the stage to some extent, although we're still sort of wallowing in Black pain a little bit there. And some of the fiction writing, you know, which is moving onwards to Afrofuturism, and - and all the other spaces. I am with Nick. I think I'm - I'm very, very hopeful.

RL Do you think - Pat, do you think that it's - it's because of the things you - you - you mentioned? Or do you think that this renaissance would be happening now anyway? Or is it in spite of those things is...

PC No, I think - To be honest, I do think the fact that COVID has stripped away some of the pretences about inequality, that Black Lives Matter is front and centre, and allyship has become a thing. I think Me Too because it has successfully prosecuted some of the people that have persecuted women. It's begun to build a platform that I think it's our duty now to make even stronger, that says that "It's okay. My voice needs to be heard. My hair needs to be talked about. My fear at having to sit in the different carriage on the train or to look around every night when I walk around. All of those things are valid and should be talked about." So, yes, I think things have changed and I think we now have to build on it or it can slip back.

PW And so we come to our final question. And because we like to end on a note of celebration, what are the best things about being Rachel Long?

RL Sorry, I laughed at it. It was -

PW No, it's okay.

RL And I was like, "Oh, God, I'm not going to be able to answer that." The best thing, oh...

PC You can choose two or three.

RL You can choose - You can choose 10 if you want, you massive egotist. I... One of the best things. Things that I like, but I don't usually do this. Things I like about myself. My ability to rest if I need to rest because there's lots of people around me who do not give themselves permission to rest. And something I was talking to Roger Robinson and Nick Makoha about yesterday was that, you know, this whole - All - All of the - this strong Black woman or Black people being stronger, and things like that, and - and - and kind of because of that, not being able to rest even more, like we're not machines. And I - I love my bed. So I love that about myself, that I don't feel that bad about resting. I like... This is such a strange thing to say or do. I... Reading, sometimes whilst resting as well. And I don't know why I've turned around into my kitchen and I've seen a half-drunk bottle of wine. I think one of the best things about being Rachel Long is her ability to discover nice wines and enjoy them.

PW That's fine.

PC A very precious ability.

RL Sorry, was that a bit of a cop out? I find it really hard to be like, “I love this about myself.”

PC I know. And that - And that - that’s kind of why we ask.

RL Okay.

PC We can see what needs to be celebrated, and sometimes you just want to remind the really talented people that we speak to that - that, you know, there’s a lot to be thankful for.

RL Aw, thank you.

PC Thank you very much, Rachel.

RL The way you’ve read me was - It just really means so much. So much.

PC We’re looking forward to a nice, shiny future for you.

PW Yeah.

RL Thank you.

PW Do check with our website theamplifyproject.co.uk for other podcasts in this series and for further information about Black British writing.

PC The Amplify Project is funded by Arts Council England.

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