



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Dreda Say Mitchell

Pauline Walker Dreda Say Mitchell is a bestselling and award-winning author. Her first novel, *Running Hot*, was published in 2004 and won the crime writers association's John Creasey Memorial Dagger Award for best first novel. The first time a Black British writer has received this honour. Since then, she has written 14 more books across three series and has moved into writing psychological thrillers. She was the 2011 chair of the Theakston Harrogate Crime Fiction Festival, one of the world's largest crime fiction festivals. Her short story, featuring Agatha Christie's famous amateur sleuth, Miss Marple, was included in the Marple anthology, which was published in 2022. She is a broadcaster and journalist and has been a frequent guest on television and radio, including presenting Radio four's flagship book programme, Open Book. Dreda is also a campaigner and speaker on social issues and was commissioned by the Youth Justice Board to pilot a creative writing and mentoring project focusing on young offenders of African, Caribbean mixed heritage and white working-class backgrounds. She was appointed an MBE for her services to literature and education work in prisons. Dreda was born and raised in the East End of London, where she continues to live. Dreda Say Mitchell, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Dreda Say Mitchell Thank you for having me.

Patricia Cumper I have to say, first of all, writing that introduction meant we had to edit down your many, many achievements. But that's the introduction we came to. So, I hope you're okay.

DM Oh, beautiful. Wonderful. You've captured me so well.

PW Tell us about growing up in the East End. How do you think that shaped you as a person and a writer?

DM I think if I hadn't grown up in East London, I probably wouldn't have been a writer. So, my parents are from a Caribbean Island called Grenada, and lots of Grenadians when they came, went to West London, where the Trinidadians went. But our people came to east London. And East London is a place with such guts. I'm thinking Patricia, Pat in East London, everyone would call you Trish. You alright, Trish and stuff, it's got a real buzz. Even if you told them to stop, they still call you Trish. So, it's still got that individuality about it. But it's a very different East London now to the one that I grew up in. So, it was in the 60's, 70's, 80's, and it was poor. It was really, really poor. So, for me, literature started in two ways. First of all, it started with my dad's friends used to come around on a Friday night playing dominoes and while they're playing dominoes, they're telling these exaggerated stories. And all these guys left school before they were 16. And we used to sit on the floor back then. Can you imagine asking a kid to sit on the floor now? They'd be rolling their eyes. And you just used to listen to the stories that they told, the characters they invented, the way they told the story, such drama, suspense and exaggeration. My mum as well, because in my house this is one of the things I say, we didn't have any books in my house. All we had was, my mum had her hymn book which she took out for Songs of Praise and her Bible, and my dad just used to buy lots of

tabloid newspapers and that was the only books we had in the house. But my mum had figured out, actually, my kids don't need to have lots of books in the house because around the corner there's an amazing building called a library. And so, that was the other place that influenced me, was Whitechapel Library. And my mum used to send me, my sister, my two brothers and we used to take some, our mates who are our neighbours as well, and we just used to go down to Whitechapel Library. And, when I grew up, I had no idea of the significance of this building in the community, that it was a real place of politics, of discussion. And next door to the library was Whitechapel Art Gallery and we never told mum this and she never found this out. We used to sneak into Whitechapel Art Gallery, and it was all free. And around the corner from both those buildings were Brick Lane, around the other corner is Petticoat Lane Spitalfields. And very often when I talk about growing up in East London because I see some people look at me, particularly when I say the 60's, 70's, they're like, oh, my God, it must have been so terrible. We didn't have money, but it was so rich in culture, it was so rich, a kind of education around culture. So, I think from a very early age I just had a notion that I could do a lot of things and also both my parents left school before they were 16. Before my dad came to England, he was a fisherman. But they had such aspirations about education and it's only when I've been back to Grenada and talked, that Grenada is an island that is big on education. And I think what I learned was my parents didn't come all the way across the world for me to do nothing. So, I had all this culture around me, all these great buildings, all these amazing books, parents who were saying you can go for it, but not with a lot of pressure. They never really said you've got to be a doctor or a lawyer, it's just, be what you can be. And so, for me East London is important because it opened pathways and I started to understand to get what I want in life, just at the start, it's not about money, it's just breaking through doors and going through doors that people open for me.

PC So, the next question is, when did you start writing? When did you start putting words on the page? I mean that's a wonderful background and I recognise that Caribbean energy so well, but there's a difference between taking stuff in and then putting stuff out. When did putting words on the page become part of your life?

DM I kind of challenge that notion slightly, about it just being about putting words on the page, it's about the oracy around you. So, for example, my dad and his mates, they weren't writing things down, we're hearing so, it's about having storytelling around you. When I went to school, everyone thinks I was great at English, I was not. I had a fantastic history teacher who was amazing, and all I could think about was, I want to go to university and study history, which I did. I went to SOAS and did an African history degree, but I always felt there was a bit of me that wanted to write. I started dabbling, I think, about the year 2000, but it wasn't until 2004 I decided to do something about it. And I thought, you know what, I'm not sure I'm really good at it because I've only got a grade C, O level in English Language and Literature but let me see. And I found this course at the Groucho Club and one of my besties, I went to her, and I said, I found this course, I found it in Time Out, it's at the Groucho Club. They say, you don't have to be a member. And she said to me, don't apply, because somebody like you won't get in it. You know, the you, being -

PC Yeah, but the Groucho did have a reputation for being pretty snobbish.

DM - Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PC Yeah, so, maybe she was protecting you, but I completely understand your -

DM Yeah, yeah, yeah, but she was protecting me because she's still one of my besties. But there's a difference between saying, do you know what? Go for it, and I'm going to support you to, don't go. And that's what I realised. If you don't go, you will never, ever find out. Here's somebody, open a door for me, potentially, and I was really shocked by what she said. And I rang up and this woman, Maggie picked up the phone who ran the course, and she said, we've got one space left, you sound like just what I want. And I remember going, it was a Saturday and it's bright and the sun's out down to Soho, and I'm feeling like, I'll show my friend, I'll show her. But you know what? The nearer I got, the nearer the doubt started to grow. And I realised she planted a seed of doubt in me. And by the time I got there, I remember at the reception, I had my head down, like, but don't look at me too much, you know. And I never forget going up the stairs, I was like a tortoise with my head inside the shell. And when I got in the room, I thought, my gosh, all these people, they must know what they do, I bet most of them are journalists and a lot were. And I thought, you know what? I'm going to just find a corner and just sit there and just keep quiet and see what I can learn. And you know what happened? I just put my head down and was writing. And what I didn't realise was Maggie, who ran the course, was thinking about setting up her own publishing house with somebody else, Jane Havel. And I went to the course for a year, and then I stopped because it was a Saturday, part time in the morning. And then Maggie called me up, and she said, do you know what? I was loving what you were writing, your book that you were writing, and she said, can we have the first chapter for an anthology? I've setup this publishing house, and I thought, oh, my gosh, and then I sent it off. And then they came back two weeks later and said, we just want to publish the whole thing. I didn't have an agent or anyone, and I said, yeah, and then I got back home, and my partner, who's my husband now, I said, they want to publish the whole thing, but I haven't got the whole thing, help. And that became *Running Hot*, the book that won the John Creasey Memorial Dagger. And years later, I said to Maggie, why did you choose me, of all the people in that class? She said, one, I knew you would finish, and two, your book sounded so different to what everybody else was writing and what I was hearing. And it made me think when my friend said, somebody like you won't get in. The you part of you won't get in, is what got me through, because it's the you part of me is different that makes me stand out from the crowds. That East Endness, that Grenadianess, that Caribbeaness, you know. You can hear I'm from Grenada because we don't shut up. And if I hadn't gone through that door, I wouldn't be sitting here today. I wouldn't have won the Memorial Dagger. I would have still been a teacher. I'd still be working in education, and that's not a problem but I had other pathways to explore. So, I say to people, just hear with your heart and your head at the same time, and sometimes people are trying to protect you, but inside, you know what you should do. Try it. You might fall on your face. It reminds me of my dad once. I was a bit upset, and he said, oh, what's the matter? He made me a cup of tea, and then he gave it a good 10 minutes, and then he turned around with his wise eyes and voice, and he said, you know what? In life, you can't always cry. This is the life. You have ups, you have downs and he said, expect to get knocked back. But when you get knocked back, what do you do? You get up and you start all over again and that's just been my mantra through life. Some things work, some things don't, but the one constant is I will have a go. So, yeah, an advert in Time Out was what got me to really write the words down on the paper.

PC Well, that and put it together with that little knot of toughness that I find so many writers have. They realise that it's something they can do, and they go for it. I'm going to take you back a little bit with the next question, because you worked for many years as a teacher, you also work as a broadcaster, you work in prisons. There's something about educating other people that is important to you.

DM Education is just so important to me because it was important to me as well and I can see that if you get access to certain types of education, you could fly. It's about doors opening again for you. I never forget. So, I was in my school library, this is when I was studying for A levels, and I came across this book called *The Black Jacobins*, and I went to a Catholic girl's school. There were no pictures of black people on the wall, believe you me. There were hardly any books by black authors or authors of colour there at all. So, when I saw this book, I thought, oh, what's that about? And then it had a picture of Toussaint Louverture, obviously in his Napoleonic style uniform, written by C. L. R. James. And I took that and I took my time reading it and it just opened my world. And it opened my world because I started to think in terms of education, I don't really know much about black history. I know what my family know so much and my parents, they were traditional as well, so, they're not going to tell you. So, for example, my dad did not like, as far as he's concerned, Rastafarians. They should get their haircut, that kind of thing, you know. Whereas around me, I'm seeing all this stuff, I want to learn about it, and that's when I decided to study an African history degree at SOAS. So, for me, education has always been this important thing and I still do it now. It's at the core of me. And the way I got involved with prisons was I'd written one of my books and the publisher who did the audiobooks, they said, we're doing an event for prison librarians. They have a conference every year and we want a writer to come along and talk. And they said, we know you like to talk, and bring also the actor who does the audio who narrates it. So, we went down, and we did our thing, and it was great and then all these prison librarians started coming up to me, will you come to our prison? Will you come to our prison? And it really chimed with me because my first book, *Running Hot*, was about my experience in East London. And the experience I had in East London was a lot of the women I knew, even if they fell by the wayside in terms of illegality and stuff, when they had their kids, they try and sort themselves out and they were more likely to go into part time and evening education. A lot of the guys I knew and I'm thinking of somebody very close to me, they fell by the wayside, and they end up, back then it was borstal. No, it was the youth centre first, and then it was borstal. Then it's prison and they're involved. He broke the chain, but they're in this chain and they can't get out. And that's what *Running Hot* was about. It's about schoolboy, street guy, very clever, exceptional cook. He gets an opportunity to cook in a really great restaurant. He lives in Hackney, a great restaurant in Devon but he makes a false move at the start. Seven days, will he or won't he make it? So, young black men, for me, that's what I started with, was young black men for me, and white working-class men. It was just a priority for me and that's how I got involved in prisons, in young offenders. And then I started writing about women a lot more. So, my next set of books were the Gangland Girl books, and it's about four young girls, and then we meet them when they're 15 and then 15 years on. And then my next book was about another family of women. And I started to realise, oh, my God, I'm writing about women all the time, and that connection between daughters and mothers. And it took this book, *Say Her Name*, which was the book I wrote last year, and published by Amazon, their crime imprint, Thomas and Mercer. And a very wise editor said, why do you write? And I said, well, no, he said, why do you write? And, you know, I took it away and I thought, oh, my goodness, I know what I'm writing. My mum passed away very suddenly when I was 28. And I started to realise all these books about young women trying to engage with their mothers. And it made me realise that a lot of the grief I dealt with my mum was unresolved. And I thought, oh, my goodness me. Because these books are across genre, but they're all at the core about these young women particularly trying to find out, particularly about their mothers. And I didn't even realise that's what I was doing. I think that's one of the things that I love about writing, you don't even realise, because I used to say to people, oh, no, I never write about me. Oh, no, I'm not interested, I don't write about me. When all the time I've been writing about me.

PC Oh, yeah, but don't you think that's what people connect to? There's a fundamental honesty in writing, and if you try and slip and slide too much, people actually pick up on it really strongly. But I have to say, as a writer, the thing, I'm so shallow, the thing that really impressed me was that you set up the world, you set up the characters and then you bong the ticking clock on it, seven days. And so, you had to push the action along. So, essentially, it's the action pushing everything in terms of character and situation. I thought, oh, I love that. I love the discipline of that.

DM I tell you how that happened, because I didn't think I was writing a crime book. When I got, Maggie said, we want to publish the whole thing and I thought, yeah, yeah, celebration. I said to Tony, oh, my goodness me, I haven't got the rest. So, we used to go out, we used to go off to Stoke Newington until every Sunday and say, well, what happens next? What happens next? And it gives it that kind of narrative drive and urgency in the seven days. And then our publishers had a really well-known crime author, was one of their friends, and she was the one that says, I hope you're going to put this in for the John Creasey Dagger Award. And we thought, yeah, is this a crime book? And then what we noticed was, when we would go to gatherings, like little parties or whatever, and people say, what do you do? I'm a writer, and so, what do you write? Well, we're writing this book about this young black guy and he's looking for redemption. And you can see people always walking backwards, like, my goodness, that sounds really heavy, you know. And then we said, I think we need to kind of change what we're saying. And then somebody had asked and we said, this guy has been chased by these two gangs. He's got seven days to get out of Hackney. He's got his dream job, oh, my God, when's it coming out, you know?

PW Get them excited.

PC It's a difference between theme and plot, isn't it?

DM It is.

PC Because thematically, it is about redemption, but the plot is -

DM Yeah, you get your theme through the action and through the plot.

PC Absolutely.

DM I have to say, the reason I've continued to write crime fiction is, I realise I can do that, but also, the crime fiction writing community and blogging is just superb. It's just fantastic. I was just embraced from the get-go. People went out of their way to make sure I got great reviews. I'll give you another story. So, I went to my first crime fiction convention to be on a panel, all very excited, up in Bristol, and this really tall man came up to me. I was looking for somebody and I couldn't find them and I'm a bit of a mutterer. So, I was muttering this person's name and this tall guy came up to me and said, oh, are you looking for X? And I said, yes, he said, I know where he is, I'll show you. And then later on, very tall guy came and sat with me, and he said, I've been hearing terrific things about your book and stuff. And then I finally looked, and it was Lee Child.

PC Wow.

DM Lee, you know, amazing Lee Child, who since then has just been our biggest supporter. After that event, he went back to New York and he did a feature with the Daily Mail, and they said, which are your top six books? And of course, *Running Hot*, he put in as one of his top six books and anytime and I'm sure you can see Lee for quotes. We thought Lee, Lee, Lee, you've had to read the book in quote. What other literature community could you go to get one of the top people who will

take somebody like me, who's not really established, who's had one book out to do something like that? It's a very, very special community, the crime community.

PW That was really very generous of him, wasn't it?

DM Of course, yeah, but that's not the only one. Martina Cole, met Martina because I started to write my *Gangland*, strong women books. I met her at an event, can't remember how I got her number, and I rang her up and I said, oh, Martina, I'm wondering, she said, do you want a quote? And I went, yeah, she said, why don't you come and spend the whole day with me? And I went down to her house and spent the whole day with Martina Cole. Where else would that happen for you? I think it's, not generous, I think it's very special. And I think the crime writing community is interesting because I think for a long time, not anymore, but for a long time, they were kind of dissed and put down by the literary community as not proper fiction. So, I think that gave them a really strong bond and an understanding that in their world, because it's such a popular genre, there's room for everybody because there are enough readers. Readers just can't get enough of it. So, there's none of that feeling threatened at all. I've just been very welcomed.

PC That's lovely to hear. Really nice to hear.

PW Talking about *Running Hot*, was that when you, did you start to think of yourself as a writer then when you were putting that together?

DM I did, it was. It was like, oh, my gosh, I think I'm a writer now, you know? And I never forget I took my sister, who's proper East London, to my publisher when our publisher got it all mocked up with the cover. And we went down, and Maggie showed it to us, and we were just like, wow, but we're playing very cool in her house. Oh, Maggie, that looks great, that looks wonderful and when we got outside, we were like, yes, yes, you know. And it was a yes with I never got an advance for that or anything, because for me, that is the start of my career. And now, I can then look for advances and other type of things.

PC Without being stereotypical, the men seem to claim being writers much earlier in their career than the woman we've spoken to, because it's a thing, a writer is almost a kind of responsibility. You're narrating a society's story.

DM Yeah, it is. It's interesting because I keep saying we, because I co-write for a long time with my partner, Tony. So, my first five books, he was there in the background and then we thought, you know what? I think he should have some royalties, shouldn't he? So, we started to write together, but it's only with Thomas and Mercer that his name is on the book, Ryan Carter and his mum and dad. His mum's 96, and can you imagine? She sees that for her eldest son on a book cover. What an amazing thing for her and I think because we write together, it's an easier process. We bounce lots of ideas off each other, we tap into our skills and strengths. So, he's a much better plotter than me in terms of action plotting with twist and turns. I'm much better at the emotion bit for example, we wrote this scene in one of our *Gangland* strong women books, and our main character, her daughter gets shot in this club and Ryan just wrote, her daughter got shot and blah, blah, blah. And I said to him, her daughter's got shot, I think there needs to be an emotional reaction here, that kind of thing. Whereas he does all those dramatic twists and turns, like our first psychological book, *Spare Room*. I mean, some of the stuff in there comes from Ryan, and I have no idea how he thinks up these twists and turn. So I feel lucky to be able to work in a partnership, particularly as I think for lots of writers that we meet, it can be quite a lonely existence. And also, sometimes they find themselves in families that are not taking their writing seriously. It's still considered as their hobby

that they kind of do, I think, particularly for women, that happens quite a lot. So, we're a serious writing household and I love it, absolutely adore it.

PC And what's nice about that is, yes, writing on your own is lonely, but it's also that if you have somebody to bounce things off, you can begin to test ideas, so that the first time somebody else sees it, it's already been tested.

DM That's right, exactly. And the editing as well, because I do a lot of the editing, because Ryan joined my journey, if you like. We always talk about his writing needs to be "Dreded up, so, I often will do that and I like to do the editorial, but I just think it's a discipline that I've got from being a teacher. You just crack on and you just do it where he is. You know what? I need another cup of coffee now and I have to go in with a stick and say, come on, come on, are you writing? Come on.

PW Do you literally write together in the same room or at the same time or how does it work?

DM You must be joking. Can you imagine that? Whoa, we've got different processes. We've both got our own writing rooms. He has his foot up on the table, keyboard on his lap, and he has music. I can't write with music. I haven't got my foot up on the table. I'm very intense and I use a method called the Pomodoro method, I think it's called. So, this is you put your stop clock on for 20 minutes, I like to do it for half an hour. And we're big plotters, I should say beforehand, we're big plotters. I never write a scene if we don't know what we're writing in it. I put my thing on and then you just write. You just write. And it is amazing how many words you get because you just get into your world and then the clock will ping and it's up to you whether you have a five-minute break or then you do it again. I like to just do it again. So, we write very quickly. We wrote this, *Spare Room*, in a month.

PC Wow.

DM Yeah, yeah.

PW That's amazing.

DM Most books take us six weeks or so, yeah.

PW That's why you're so prolific.

PC We're both over here going, oh, my God.

PW Absolutely.

DM We write like 3000 words a day.

PC Wow.

PW That's amazing.

DM Yeah, but I'm finished by 2 p.m. But I get up at 7 a.m. Do you see what I'm saying? It's the intensity and it's the method you use beforehand. We have to plot our scenes as much as we can, so, when we go, we know we're writing. Because I think for us, it's really important that we finish our books, really.

PC You've written a series of books with core characters. So, my question to you as a writer is, how do you keep it fresh? How do you not repeat with the same characters things from book to book?

DM You're just in a world, you're in a world with your characters and you've got a sense of where you think you want them to go, who you want to introduce, you'll know, you're in a particular type of in crime, a certain type of subgenre. And I think the big thing for me is listening to your readers. So, for example, we wrote one of our Gangland series, it's called the Flesh and Blood Series, which our readers just call the Blood Series. And originally, it was a story of two women, their mother, who lived on an estate in Mile End, lots of ducking and diving and all sorts going on. And another female character, I don't want to say too much about her, because there's a twist at the end of the story, and it's called Blood Sister. And it wasn't until we wrote that book that we realised our readership, who are women of, say, 35 plus, they really tapped into the mother character, Babs, and they wanted to have stories about Babs. And so, we were able then to turn the series into Babs's story with her girls. And it just became a very, very interesting story, what we would have done was just continue to write about her girls and Babs being in the background. So, you've got to be tuned into your readers. And I think sometimes one of the great things is to send what you're writing to a core group of readers. People call them beta readers, and you get them on board. And these are people who've been fans of your books for a long time, but they're also people who will tell you the truth. That's what you need. You know, you need some truth here and they will really help you with your books. And series f are the way to go very often, because once somebody's read one of that series, they're more likely to come back. We're published with a mainstream publisher, Thomas and Mercer Amazon, who were mainly a digital publisher, but we also self-publish our books. And that has just changed our attitude about us as writers and about how we write and how you reach audiences. To me, that's when our big success started.

PC That's fascinating for me, because do you write a life history of your characters, like a background? Or do you just know them? And how far in advance do you see them 10 years, 15, 20 years down the road?

DM Yeah, sometimes we do see them like that, so the series that we write, they're all set in East London and Strong Women and these dramatic families and we just tap into the world that we both grew up in, that we both know. And so, it's easy then and you've got to remind yourself there's only so much you can write in a book. There's no point overloading it. Save some for the next story. So, somebody establishes himself, for example, as the Queen of Crime in the Underworld. Well, you know, maybe in book two, there's going to be a challenger coming along. But what if the challenger was setup by somebody in her family who's been jealous? And it's all about jealousy in the family and those East End books are all about family, really. So, we really call them family drama with crime whereas the psychological books to us, are crime books. The psychology of it. They're still about people, they're still about relationships but the crime we think of much more. So, we love writing both of them.

PC Do you setup certain characters to be more lovable and attractive and others to be?

DM Okay, so, let me talk about self-publishing. So, what I've learned from self-publishing so, what they have in self-publishing is it is better to write a series and if you're writing this series of books, don't leave too much time between the books because your reader wants to come back and find out about them. And you've got a core person in that book, and you'll write about them. If the readers start liking other characters, what you then do is you might write a few novellas about those characters.

PC Excellent, yeah.

DM A few novellas about the character, they can't overshadow your main character, unless you think, oh, you know what? That main character is a bit of a drip. (Overlapping Conversation)

PC The energy has gone from that character.

DM Push them out of the room and see if anyone notices and stuff and replace them. And I love writing those series because you create these worlds, and with these worlds for us, a big thing with the series that we write is we tap into what we know will be some of the lived experiences of our readers. So, I remember when we wrote one of our books, *Blood Daughter* and Babs and one of her daughters falls out, and then by the end, they've come back, they've had their rocky road, they come back together. I never forget a reader writing to me and saying, I'm so glad that Babs and Dee are back together again, you know? And I can imagine in her own world something like that happened to her, or she knew people where that had happened. So, these stories are kind of real for our readers and what we found out about the self-publishing world, you write those books, you're more likely to get a good financial stability. So, that's the other big thing for me that's changed since I was writing so, like I said, I never got an advance. I didn't ask for an advance or anything like that. I had a really great job in education. I was a consultant, and I got paid well. But when I started moving in a traditional publishing world, so, I was with one of the big five for about 10 years, and they were lovely, and they were great people. But after a while, even though I had a good advance at the beginning, but that started to dwindle and check it out. What job would you be in where you would, after a couple of years, expect to get a pay cut, then a pay cut, then a pay cut? You'd probably take them to a tribunal, wouldn't you, or something? I started to think that they did not have as big an ambition as I did for myself. I remember what I talked about; my parents didn't come all the way across this world for me not to have big ambition for myself. And I remember me and Ryan started thinking, well, what can we do here? And I said, right, let's get out of that, let's just leave and try the self-publishing world. And this is when I say that it's a great crime world, crime community. So, there were a couple of really well-known authors who wrote crime, who self-published and were doing fantastically. Not just well, they were doing brilliantly. So, I'd just send people little, hello, it's Dreda. Do you fancy lunch and stuff? And people would come and they would just be generous enough, give me a lunch and I'll tell you the process. And, oh, my goodness, we were so well supported. So, we did one book and we thought, oh, my God, it works. And then a small, digi press husband and wife team who ran, they setup Bloodhound Books, which they've sold up now. They said, oh, we've always loved your books, Dreda. Do you fancy doing some books with us? So, we committed to doing two books and we thought, oh, my God, this is where we could write our psychological thriller. And this is where *Spare Room* came, and I think we wrote it in a month because we were so excited. I remember when we were writing it because our rooms are upstairs and down the corridor from each other. I remember I would run to Ryan and go, oh, my God, I've got this and he'd run to me, oh, my God, you know, with that level of kind of excitement. And this book, *Spare Room*, ended up as one of the number one books in Kindle in the US and in Britain. And they didn't give us an advance. We made our money through royalties, because they put their books on the KDP platform, which is Amazon's self-publishing platform for anyone, including if people want to setup their own digital presses as well. I can say this, but I'm not able to say who. We got a massive film deal with this as well.

PW Oh, brilliant.

PC Brilliant.

DM Yeah. I just have to say that -

PC Yeah, leave it there.

DM - And that's leaving a big publisher. So, we started thinking, do you know what? We would like to do self-publishing, but we want to write what we consider to be significant books, and we want to write them with the person who's got the biggest digital reach, who is Amazon, is their platform. So, once again, Dreda, on her email, found one of their editors. Hello, it's Dreda here. And we just talked to Jack, one of their senior editors, and he said, let me talk to the others and he said, yes, we'd love to do that. And that's how I got to write *Say Her Name*. Believe me, we've got another one coming out next year in April. But because those books are only coming out every year, that's not enough for us, writing one book a year. So, we're going back to do it as self-publishing as well. And what I will say is, if you've got a fan base, a readership already, this is for mid-list authors. And you start doing self-publishing, you start using all the marketing tools like Amazon ads, which people will teach you how to do. There are loads of courses, it's not too expensive, Facebook ads, your readers are loyal to you, you will make a great living and I say this on air, we could not believe the amount of money that we made through self-publishing. We couldn't believe it.

PC One of the things that you get from mainstream publishing is, oh, it's too expensive to market, we can't market it properly. And yet you found a way around that. What do you think word of mouth played in your success? Is it word of mouth? Is it fan loyalty?

DM It is, but I think really, it's marketing. So, if you're a traditional publisher, you're more likely to market your big books on the underground, on the back of a bus, whatever. Well, people see that, but that doesn't guarantee they're going to buy it. Whereas what Amazon do, and traditional publishers use this as well, is you can do something like on Kindle called Amazon ads and you have to set it up, which is not too bad to setup. And then you do all these ads. You have to have a visual for your book. You do these ads, it's very easy. You put money against and then it's a sponsored ad. So, your book ends up on other people's book pages, on Kindle. And what better place to have your advert than on the place where people actually buy the books? And you just get loads and loads of other readers through that. So, for example, if I was doing an Amazon ad for my Gangland books, well, I'd make sure the ads hopefully would appear on Martina Cole's page and other authors who write in that because that's where the readership is. And they'll be like, oh, I didn't know, oh, I'll have a go at that because I'm an avid Kindle reader as well. And I know some people in the traditional publishing world go, oh, but the prices are so low for the books on Amazon. If your book is 99p and below, you get 30% of that royalty. However, if it's more than that, you get 70%. So, most books are £1.99, £2.99 and if you can imagine how many thousands of people would buy your book and you get 70% of that. You know, our first books that we did with a *Big Mo* Gangland series, we wrote the first book three years ago. We've only done three books because we've been doing work with Thomas and Mercer and we still get money every month from all of those books, still get money. And you enter a world where you can go into promotions or Amazon will just contact you and say, can we put your book in a promotion for you, like prime reading or something? And if Amazon, anyone listening, if Amazon come to you on Kindle, do it. Just do it, because you'll get such a, much better readership so, we're in this, what people call a hybrid model, and we're having our cake and eating it, and it feels very nice, it really does, because after a while, I was very bothered by the money thing in publishing. I was bothered by this sense that artists don't really need a lot of money. Do you know what? It is work. It is hard, hard work and I don't see why I shouldn't get this similar money to what somebody else has. And it's a very secret world because you're getting this, but you don't know what other people are getting unless you ask. And it all feels so scatter gunned because there doesn't seem to be any formula when I ask people. And we just decided, you know

what, let's give it a go. Our readers are great, and they are great, and I have to say, me and Ryan are two very, very happy writers.

PC Excellent. You see, we'd setup a question now to ask you about deadlines, because I know there's some writers who ignore them, there's some writers who hate them, some who love them, but you seem to create your own deadlines in the way that you write.

DM I think so. I think it's because I was a teacher and you've got your lesson plan, and you need your lesson plan, because who knows when the inspector is going to turn up at the door, you know, really. And not only that, going back to what Maggie at the Groucho Club said to me, I knew you would finish. That was one of the reasons I chose you. You're going to put your head down and you've got to finish it. Patricia Highsmith, I know she had, you know, lots of things going on in her life, shall we say, but I read a biography of her and she did a top 10 lists of things that were important to her, and number 1 was, take yourself seriously. Take yourself seriously. If this writing is a serious pursuit for you, put your head down and do it. I remember years ago, someone who I knew, and they were writing, and they were still writing their first book, and I said, well, what's happening? And they said, well, you know, I'll go down to Soho, and I think some people have got this idea being a writer is going down to Soho and hanging out, doing all this. No, it's about sitting there and getting on. It's work. It is work and I think I've got this work ethic from my parents and from being working class. You put your head down and you graft, you finish.

PC Yeah. It's completely not the question we wanted to ask, but I love the idea that you create your own structures, and you generate your own deadline.

DM And deadlines, , if my publisher has given me a deadline, unless something really terrible happens and we've got to change it, I want them to take me seriously as well. I don't want them to think I'm mucking them around, so, I put my head down. There's only been one deadline I didn't meet, and that was through something very serious personally that had happened. Other than that, always meet deadlines, always.

PC It's about being professional as well, isn't it?

DM Yeah, that's the word, professional. Thank you, Pauline, yeah.

PC Now, this is a question we ask all the writers that we've spoken to. Do you consider yourself a black writer? Does that mean anything to you? Is it a title you embrace?

DM No I don't. I consider myself, think about that phrase, black writer. What comes first? Black and then writer. No, I'm a writer first, really. I'm a writer who is black. I'm a writer who's a woman. I'm a writer who can't shut up. I'm a writer from East London. I'm so many things. I think once you stick a descriptor in front of writer, you're stuck. And we know what people think as soon as they see the term black writer. Unfortunately, because these are important issues to talk about, they think your book is only going to be about racism, being oppressed. It's going to be about a migration story, or what me and Ryan used to call Red Dust stories from Africa, you know, that they seem to love at the Booker Awards and stuff, you know, and all that kind of imagery, and it boxes you in. Never, ever, ever do I want to be boxed in my writing career at all. So, I don't describe myself as a black writer at all. I'm a writer who is black, and I embrace my blackness because I love my blackness. I love my blackness, but it's not the only thing that I'm writing about. But also, I think black writers it's a shame, because I think when people do see that, they do see certain things. It's a shame, because black writers probably want to write about lots of different things, but people's expectations, it

reminds me of, and I don't know what you think about this, but it reminds me of the 90's when they used to have the black sections in the bookshop, and I get why they're doing it. They're raising representation but the problem is your book ends up in a black section. And most of the people who come into there, like my crime book, they're never going to go over there, not interested in looking in the black section, rather than it just being in the crime section. I get why that is and see, that's my other thing as well, about black imprints. I think kind of people are going to say this and that about me but let me say it. I think that about black imprints, as well. I think they're great for raising profile, but authors have to be very careful because you might end up being stuck, might end up not getting a big readership. And one of the big things for me as a writer, I want as big a readership as possible, really, all those things. They're well intentioned and everyone's heart is in the right place, but I sometimes think they can kind of really narrow the pathways for writers who are black or writers of colour.

PC Yeah, that's my response to the word, a tolerant society. Don't tolerate me.

DM No, exactly.

PC I'm here.

DM Exactly.

PW Talking about your readers. Do they actually write to you? Do they email you? How do they get in touch with you?

DM I'm active on Facebook, so, I've tried to, I just came off, oh, is it called X now? X I've come off and Instagram and stuff. I'm not there. Facebook is my place. That's where I find a lot of my readers. I remember once so what happened to me was when I was during when I was writing my first, after I'd written my first Gangland Series, my dad got very poorly and he passed away, and it was quite a shock, and I found it hard to get my equilibrium back. And it was when I was thinking, should I be with this publisher? Shouldn't I be with this publisher? And of course, time marches on, and a year had gone on or so, and I saw this other author, and she said, you know, my Facebook page? Everyone keeps saying, what's happened to Dreda? Where is Dreda? Do you know where Dreda is? And I didn't know how to setup Facebook, and she very kindly came over and setup Facebook for me, and we did it together. And then I went on there and everyone said, oh, Dreda, you're back. And I explained what the situation had been with my dad, and they were just so kind and so embracing. So, I know that my readers, they will spread the word for me. These are genuine people who love the book, and that's your relationship with them, your relationship with them is with an author. Because I think sometimes you've got to be very clear. You can't stray into the personal unless that's what you want, and you're very gentle about that, so, they know. So, I've got groups of readers who will read for me after I've done our editorial. This is in the self-publishing world. I've got a reader then who will read the book just to make sure there's no outstanding errors. If my readers see an advert that's gone up, one of our Facebook ads, they make sure they will re whatever it is, what's it on Facebook? Like, repost and share it. Yeah, they're just very, very loyal, and they're loyal because they love your work and I think that's just the biggest compliment ever, really.

PC But can I say also that there's something fundamentally about your personality that I think attracts people and to trust you. I have to say, do you remember how we met?

DM I do.

PC In a coffee shop. I'd seen you on television and I never do this. I came over and said, hello, my name is Pat and I think you're nice.

DM That's right.

PC There's an integrity to the way that you deal with people that, I think is part of what is part of that.

DM That's nice. It's very Grenadian. It's very, very, very Grenadian. You sit on a bus with a Grenadian, you're like, oh, my God, get me off this bus they're talking so much. So, I think I come with that, because I think when you think about the Caribbean community, when they came over, , think about that Caribbean community. I remember talking to my mum and their whole attitude was, go get it. It wasn't assimilation. They knew they had to get on, so, they had to have strategies about how do you get on? How do you mesh with the community that's always this? I always remember my mum when the phone rings, she'd pick it up, oh, hello, hello, and then when she realises it's one of us, hey, it's you, and that kind of stuff. They had all their little voices, they got on and I think that's what I've learned, is you get on, you've got to interact with lots of different types of people. And I hope that's what I do in my writing world. And I genuinely like people, I think Grenadians, we like people, we like to talk, we like to socialise, we like to find out what's your politics. You know, what are you reading? Hey, where'd you get your hair done? We just like to talk. And I think that's just been a real big plus for me, that I happen to come from that heritage group. It's really helped me along my way.

PW That's beautiful. Let's talk about challenges that writers may or may not be facing today. What are your thoughts about that?

PC There is a lurking AI that everybody's talking about.

DM Yeah, but I've been reading about AI for quite a long time in self-publishing stuff. I think if you're an established writer and you've got a readership, that might not be too bad for you. And readers know when it's not you. They know, they're not stupid, they know when it's not you. I think the challenges are for the traditional publishing industry, and I know they do engage with a digital world, but they've got a big group of what they call mid-list authors who are starting to understand and think of themselves as business people. Think about how they can make a living? That's what people want. I want to make a living out of this. And actually, I can't make a living by keep doing my book with this particular organisation. So, I think that whole what's going to happen in the digital world is a huge, huge thing but I think it's going to be a plus for writers. It's going to be a plus for artists and creatives. I'm very interested to see what happens with the space because I think that's what's happened. Spaces that have been created for writers of colour and writers who are black in the traditional publishing world. Whether this is a fad or is this going to be long-term? Because what I would love to see is them working with writers and what those writers want to write about, rather than writers being pushed into writing about racism and all those other kinds of, I don't like the word stereotype because those are important issues. But this is a writer who's got loads to say about the world and if they're going to actually get that space to do it, and if they get those spaces to do it and they continue, are the financial rewards going to be there for them? Are we going to continue to see imprints for different people? Because the problem with imprints as well is they're ring fenced with money but when that money's gone, does the imprint go? What's, that publisher's intention towards those group of writers? Are they really part of us? Aren't they part of us? So, it's just interesting to see, I'm seeing in the crime world, because it's the crime fiction world, because it's

a really popular genre. I'm seeing lots more writers going down a self-publishing route or doing a hybrid route because they know that readers want them more and more and readers are great. So, when we did our first self-published book and we put it up because you've got to do all the formatting as well. And we got the formatting wrong for the paperback, and we didn't realise this, and it was what our readers contacted us and they sent us pictures, Dreda, I think you've got it, the text is a bit small here. And they will say things like, because they're so loyal to you, I know that's not your mistake, it's probably the software that was wrong, you know, things like that to you. And they're so, so nice. And so, I think one of the big issues for publishing is about those middle people. Can authors have this direct relationship and earn money just through readers? So, for example, we haven't had a literary agent for years and I have to say, as soon as we didn't have a literary agent, we became very successful because all of a sudden, we could do what we wanted to do. There wasn't a third party. And don't get me wrong, a third party is great, and I needed one at the beginning, but at this stage of my career, I don't, whereas, say, in TV and film, to get those rights bought, you need a very specialist agent. We could never do without having that type of agent. I'm meeting more and more writers who are saying they don't have literary agents. What I love at the moment is the artists creatives writers are starting to see that they're the ones with the power, we're the ones with the content, we're the ones who can learn to sell it to our audiences. We're the ones who can engage with those audiences. And that's a very, very powerful thing. I think writers are in an incredibly powerful position and it opens up a world. So, I remember when I was with my big publisher and they're lovely people, let's take that for granted. When we broached the idea of doing some self-published book, no, no, no, no, and I thought, what, have I got a ball and chain around my leg or something? These people don't own me? And I thought, no, we can't be having this. And then once you're in that world, whereas say, like, for example, Thomas and Mercer, they love that. Because they know if you do books, that's going to be great for the books that we do with you. And it's just opened up my world about the type of books that I can and maybe can write in the future and that's a great thing. And I think what we've seen at the moment is pathways opening rather than pathways shutting down. It very much upsets me when I meet writers who are having a really bad time, which is why I feel very blessed to be a trustee in the Royal Literary Fund who put everything into helping writers. And what we do is, we want writers to thrive.

PC So, I'm going to ask you to do a little horizon scanning now, just for you. What do you see in the next 10 years? Are you going to bring writers into your imprint? Are you just going to keep going? What do you see down the road?

DM No, I couldn't do that. Writers into my imprint? No, because I know writers, there'll be clashes and all kinds of things. Not for me, no, thank you. No, I don't need that emotion in my life. It's a funny thing. 18 months ago, something very traumatic happened to me and it made me stop and think about what is the life that I really want to live here? And so, I don't do the broadcasting anymore or the reviewing, I don't do the journalism anymore. I'm just focused on my writing and who I want to write with. So, I'm writing with my partner, Ryan, but he's coming of an age where he's not sure he wants to do it. So, I'm going to segue way and start probably writing with someone else who's a person who's just always been an ordinary East End mum but man, does she have stories to tell. And I can open the gateway for her to tell these stories. I don't want to have anybody else be part of that. So, that's all I want to do is I want to continue writing with Thomas and Mercer and just continue writing my books. Not forever. Not forever. I might slow down and by slowing down, I mean I might write just one book a year rather than three or four.

PW No thoughts of retirement, then?

DM I feel kind of semi-retired already. I feel like I'm in that kind of position where I'm doing what I want to do, and I'm doing all the other stuff. Like I can put up my iPad and watch Netflix. I can go to the cinema, the theatre, and go on more than one holiday a year. That's the life I want to live because I remember somebody saying to me, we were talking about money. You always get, oh, my God, if only I had 7 million and then somebody said, yeah, but what would you do with it? And I said, I don't really know. Because as you can see, if anyone could see me, they could see I don't wear flash clothes, not mega cars. Who needs more than one house? Do you know what I'm saying?

PC Yes, yes, completely.

DM I think sometimes we get caught up in what does success look like and I think success looks like what I'm living already. But I'm also relaxing and chilling. That's become an important thing for me. And also, with the broadcasting and the reviewing, I think sometimes, particularly when you might be the only person of colour who does a lot of that work. Well, you know what? I've done it for X number of years. Let them look for somebody else now, there are all these young people coming up. Give them the space to do it as well. That's how I think it should be and that's the kind of education part of me again.

PC So, we have one final question that we ask absolutely everybody. What's the best thing about being Dreda Say Mitchell?

DM Do you know what, it's changed. On the train, when I was coming, I had one thing, but now I've sat here. The best thing about being Dreda Say Mitchell is talking and then laughing and having a good time with people. You kind of reminded me of that, Pat. You really, really did. It is engaging with people, chatting. That's what life is about. It's about your relationship with other people. That's what books can do. You can build relationships with other people, but I also have a mouth that can build relationships, and I like to use it.

PC Dreda, thank you so much for being part of The Amplify Project.

DM Oh, thank you. It's just been a treat. Absolute treat. Thank you.

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