



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Courttia Newland.

Pauline Walker Courttia Newland is an author, screenwriter, playwright, creative writing tutor and literary activist. He's written 10 works of fiction. His first novel, *The Scholar* was published when he was 23. He was shortlisted for the 2007 Crime Writers Association Dagger in the Library Award, the 2010 Alfred Fagon Award and long listed for the 2011 Frank O'Connor Award. In 2016, he was awarded the Tayner Barbers Award for science fiction writing and the Roland Rees Bursary for playwriting. Courttia wrote two films for Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series for the BBC. One of which, *Lovers Rock* was jury selected for Cannes and opened the New York Festival in 2020 while *Small Axe* won the LA Critic Circle Award for Best Picture. Courttia was previously associate lecturer in creative writing at the University of Westminster and has completed a PhD in creative writing. Courttia's latest novel, *A River Called Time*, was published in 2021 and shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2022. Courttia Newland, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Courtia Newland Thank you. I'm really happy to be here.

PW So, this is the first question, when did you first become aware of words and stories?

CN I think I became first aware from like a really, really young age. So, my mum has got a picture of me, I was in a cot you know I was like in a cot and I'm sitting there and I'm just like this and I've got my book. And I'm reading in the cot. So, my mum says I taught myself to read by the time I was about three. She said no one taught me to read. I just, I was into books. And then I started telling people stories. And not long after that, I'll be that little kid who's tugging on people's trousers and skirts and saying, "Can I tell you a story? Can I tell you a story?" And then that will just go on for like hours. (Laughter) I'll be there like just making things up as I went. So, it's as far back as I can remember really. I was always into words. I was always into stories. It was just part of what I did.

Patricia Cumper You have a mixed Jamaican and Barbadian heritage.

CN Yes, I do.

PC Did that play into the sort of stories you like to tell?

CN No. I mean yes, yes definitely. I was very much into, now, when I look back, I realise I was very much into spirituality. I was very much into fantasy and science fiction. But I think that was born of the music that I was listening to. So, someone asked me the other day, at an event, they said, "What first got you into sci-fi?" And my earliest memory is sci-fi is dub. That's the first thing I remember is just being in a room that was blacked out and listening to

all those bleeps and the echo and all of that and just really like I was in the outer space and this is just like really scientific and sci-fi. And the album covers you know like math professors and scientists, the digital lettering and the guys, with the, you know, they had the keyboards and they were hooked up to all different things and computers. All of that was really intriguing for me. But also, I suppose the myths you know the myths and the legends and Anansi and all that stuff. I think that definitely played a part. But it was all like, I don't know. I said this to someone quite a while ago like it felt like our parents just automatically assume that we would just come out Caribbean. Do you know what I mean? (Laughter) They didn't really feel like they had to do anything. I'm really hyper aware of my kids now and what culture they get, lack of culture. Me and wife are always worrying about it, she's Indian. It's like, "Oh, god. They're just going to come out British." But I think they just really didn't really know what would happen. And so, everything I got wasn't really forced onto me until I was a teenager. I think when I became a teenager, my mum started to feel like, okay, I need to do some things. But everyone expected us to just get it by osmosis. They felt we'll naturally be Caribbean. And they were a bit shocked when we weren't. They're like, "Why are you talking like that? Why are you saying that?" (Laughter) I was like, "Because I was born here." But I didn't have those words obviously.

PC Right. You're a novelist, a playwright, a screenwriter. But I think I want, we wanted to start with fiction. So, your published works include science fiction, speculative fiction and recently a collection of short stories. So, what attracted you to these genres? And what are the sort of the differences between them? Can you sort of define what the difference is between science fiction and speculative fiction?

CN Not really. (Laughter) To be honest. I don't really hold much thought in those kind of like delineations and those genres. I just feel like it's all writing really. I don't mind myself. I know that people have to put things into boxes in order to define them. And I appreciate that as well. But I suppose for me, like I said I've always been into science fiction. I've always been into speculative fiction. It's just for me, different ways of telling stories. But now, again, being able to look back on what I've done and how it worked, I think I tend to move in like cycles really of, you know, how a painter might be like, oh, I'm in my, whatever, my blue mood or something like that. I have moods but according to genre. It's also things that I want to do so for my whole entire writing life, I've always wanted to like historical drama of some kind, a historical literary novel. So, that's a cycle that I'm hoping to get to at some stage. But at the minute, I'm just working through the things that feel most immediate and instinctive like the thing that have the biggest urge in me. So, I move through my social realism cycle. I might return to it but I move through that. I've moved through my crime fiction cycle. I might come back to that again. I might not. I've gone through a bit of like Afro-surrealism and stuff like that at certain point in time. And then I played about again with just straight, well, as straight as I can make it literary fiction so it's going to be a bit, you know, mixed genre. So, that was a bit mixed. I might do a straight literary fiction thing. I don't know. And now, I'm kind of exiting the speculative fiction sci-fi phase. I feel that that's coming to slightly, not an end, but you know I've done that bit. I've got two books out, and they tend to last two books. If you look through my career,

everything is like two books and then I'm out. I wish I could do three. I wish I could do trilogies but I end up always doing two books and then I move on to something else. And I've just, it's weird how I just look back and be like, that's exactly what I did throughout my career.

PC Is that sort of zeitgeisty thing? Are you responding to what's around you with those changes?

CN No.

PC Or this is entirely, entirely...?

CN It's entirely new. I wish it was zeitgeisty. (Laughter) I'll be really, really, I'll be a bit more commercially successful if it was like zeitgeisty. I tend to just go where I feel like I'm going. And like the sci-fi thing happened for me, when I really wanted to do sci-fi, it was about 2002 to 2004. And I wrote the *A River Called Time*, the first part of it between 2004 and 2006. That's when I wrote part one. So, yeah, there was definitely zeitgeisty. And I know that because my publishers were telling me, "What are you doing? Why are you doing this?" This is – who does like Black, I suppose Afrofuturism now what you call it. But I knew it existed at the time but it wasn't as popular as it is now so they were like don't do that.

PC What about short stories? Because that's really specific in terms of genre. It's not easy from my experience.

CN Yeah. Short stories was more out of, I'd written *The Scholar*. I started around then. I've written *The Scholar*. I wasn't really interested in short stories but I'd written *The Scholar*. I'd written a kind of novel that didn't work straight after *The Scholar*. And I had to get back on the horse. I had to be like, I really need to do this because if I don't do this, I'm going to be a one novel novelist and I'll give up and that will be it. I need to do something. And I think around the time after *The Scholar*, I've been writing short stories but I didn't really know how to write them. They weren't very good. But then I began in earnest to write short stories because they're quick you know. You can get them done very quickly. I can get a response from people. I was doing a lot of public readings. They're good to read alongside poets you know like they're doing a short story. And I went really short. I went to flash fiction and stuff like that. But I just found it artistically sustaining more than a novel because a novel takes so long. And so, while I was writing a novel, I would write these stories just to get immediate feedback on myself for myself. And it just grew out of that. And the first 15, 20, 30 or so were bad. And then I just like, I started to get into it. I started to get into rhythm and it took that much practice for me to actually feel like I got good. And I threw away like a ton of them. And then I started again and that slowly become *Society Within*. Because at that time when I was doing, when I was thinking like that second novel had failed, I was like, what can I do next, what can I do next. And I had about four or five stories that were also on the green side. I was like, "Ah, if I can just put them together and I can write some more, I can make an interlinked novel which I've never done before." And so that's what became *Society Within*.

PC What's beginning to emerge is that you move quite fearlessly from one thing to the next. You know I know some writers, I am a playwright end of, I'm a novelist end of, you seem to be driven by the story so it's a small story for short story and a big story for a novel.

CN Yeah, exactly, exactly. If it's something that has a small amount of characters and it's usually in a very minor amount of settings then that possibly could be a play. And that's how it comes to me. It doesn't come to me like, "Oh, I want to write a play or I want to be a playwright." I mean I absolutely fell into playwriting. And screenwriting was the only one where I was like, "I really want to do that." Because I was always really into films, written *The Scholar* like I wrote *The Scholar* and I wrote a screenplay alongside it, off *The Scholar* and that was the big plan for me to write both things and then get really rich and famous and then go back to music which is what I really wanted to do was music. And the whole time, I didn't really want to be a writer. I never really want to be a writer. Again, I kind of fell into it. But the screenwriting was the hardest thing. The screenwriting and poetry which I completely dropped because I was just like, I can't do this. The screenwriting, I actually just really, really wanted to do. And no matter how bad I was, which I was bad at, I kept at it. I kept at it. And I slowly, slowly got better. And then years later, something clicked. I was like, I know what I'm doing wrong. I'm writing novels on the page. And I used to think visually. And when I started doing that, then it all came together.

PW I wanted to ask you about *A River Called Time* and why it took you over a decade was it to...?

CN Twenty, twenty years.

PW Twenty years to like actually get it published. What was that journey like?

CN It was, god, it was quite a harrowing journey at the time. Looking back, I really feel for my wife who had to go through that with me a bit because, you know, I mean it started before I even met her but she got the brunt of it for a while. And it was always this novel that was just like I couldn't get finished. And there were a lot of things going on. Number one, like I said with the publishers. No publishers were really interested in it. They just didn't understand why I was doing this. The worst part of it was that I was talking about astral projection. Why do you talk about astral projection? That sounds like a self-help book. It's not science fiction you know. If you take the African out of it, it will be all right. If you just replace the African with quantum physics then that will be fine but your, this whole thing about African cosmology, why are you doing that? And it was just like that for years and years and years. It's like I literally gave up. I was just like, that's it. I'm going to put it in the back of my drawer and maybe one day, I'll come back to it. I had three friends around me who were there in the beginning when I first started writing it. They were like, "No, it's really good. It's really good." But I just got fed up. I got tired after the first few years. And then as we went through, the years got longer and got further and further away, I just got distracted by so many other things. And it just got harder and harder to turn back to it and say, I'm going to pick this up again. Every three or four years, I will pick it up and do a polish of part one. It's weird how people's perspectives can change your perspective of the work

so I was looking at it like, I don't think it's very good. And so, I started to feel that more and more as I moved onwards. And luckily, Hannah Knowles at Canongate, at the time, she bumped into me and she said you know I've heard you've got this science fiction book that people are talking about that you've mentioned in interviews and all that. And I gave it to her and then she said, "Look, I think it's really good." And then I could look at it with those eyes rather than the eyes I had before. So, there was that. But also, quickly, I just like to say from artistic perspective, I've written part one. I've done a whole outline of the whole book so I have that. I've been paid by the Arts Council to do two projects. One was a comic book called *Messiah* which I started and it never got finished. And the other was this part one which I started and wasn't finished. And the other thing that was wrong with this was that part two was a bit of a beast. And now, looking back, I was really scared about doing part two. It was very daunting to me. And especially part two, with no money, with no one liking it, all of that was just a bit much. But also, for myself, I just felt like how are you going to do that? It's the biggest, hardest part of the book. I can't – how are you going to tackle it? And I did try. I did couple of chapters and then I stopped. And I was just scared basically. So, there was that too.

PW What has been the reader reaction to this to the novel coming out?

CN It's been really good, really....

PW And also, you've been nominated for Arthur C. Clarke Awards.

CN That's right. Yeah.

PW So, did that make you feel vindicated? How did that make you feel really, 20 years of your life?

CN Total, total vindication, yeah. I was so vindicated by that. Yeah, the reader response, like I say we did an event. This was last week. I did it with Temi Oh and Kelechi Okafor. Yeah, we did it and it was just an amazing event and loads of people came and people were really buzzing about what we were collectively talking about and just response to *River* when I said what it's about you know. It's about a parallel of time, a parallel world where slavery and criminalisation never happened so African cosmology is the dominant religion. People just like lost their minds. And they come back to me like that was a brilliant idea. And I was like, "Wow, that's what I want at the time." (Laughter) And then years of people telling me it wasn't a brilliant idea. And so, yeah, yeah, I feel really good about it now. I really love it. I think you know I was wrong about part one. I think part two, when I actually went to write it, it was just after I've written for *Small Axe* so I literally came off doing *Small Axe*. It was being shot and then I went into writing the rest of this. I was pretty confident by then. I had this really amazing experience with Steve McQueen. He'd been very validating of me during that process and saying really kind things, all the way through it and really responded well to the script when I gave them to him. So, I think I was going in like a different person. I was like renewed. I was back you know. And when I wrote part two, it was just like it just happened. It all came out of me like a flood. It was really, really, not

easy. It was still difficult but, I was channelling. I felt like it was coming from somewhere else.

PC Do you think the shift in balance between sort of Caribbean and West African presence in Black British literature helped the idea that you had as central to that novel that, that's one of the reasons the acceptance of it was much stronger?

CN That's a great question. Yes, I do. Yes, I do. Because at the time when I was researching this and when I was putting this together, that's obviously where I was going, right? I was going into Africa as a whole, you know, as a continent but mainly, West Africa you know. Yeah, I was looking into all sorts of stuff. And I suppose it wasn't really, it wasn't involved at the time when I started. It just wasn't you know. And because in this world, this parallel world, actually, the Caribbean doesn't even exist because slavery and colonisation never happened. I mean the islands exist in the form at which we know it doesn't exist. And everything is still called by its indigenous names as Xaymaca you know, Kubanistan, you know what I mean? All of these islands is called the same names they were called then. Yeah, yeah, it was just like, it was a big proposal to them at that time. But then that happened especially in this country, I think you know the whole, just the ground scene and everything but kind of like a different perspective. And then with that came the Afro beats as well because they we're bringing that to table when they were doing that ground you know and doing their drill. And then also just what was happening in America with Black Panther and stuff like that. That obviously, was a big change for everybody in the way that everyone came out with that. But it just tapped into something that's always been there. Because you know my uncle when he came from Barbados, he's my mum's oldest brother, he lived with my mum and his mum in Harlesden, in Harlesden High Street. And he became a wedding photographer. So, he used to go to the weddings, and he had these amazing photos at the time now which he's thrown most of them away now. And they got warped and everything. I was like, "You could have exhibition with your photos, man, the stuff that you were taking." And he was doing the Caribbean community at that time which will be the late '70s, early '80s. And I, when I became a teenager I used to go and collect the money. I used to go with him and just be like, "Okay. So, how many photos do you want and dah, dah, dah." And then I take the deposit from them and stuff and then I'd give it to him and I'd get paid for that. And we went to Caribbean places. We went to Romany weddings, you know, what I mean? We went to West African weddings. So, and that's when like the first time I really heard like Afro beat, high life was, going to those parties and seeing them do their thing which is kind of like our thing but slightly different. So, all of that stuff, was happening, I think you know. It just, it hadn't been discovered, the number of things.
(Laughter)

PC That's a lovely one. (Laughter) I'm interested in your writing for theatre. When did you get into it? Why did you get into it? And I may ask you a few things about how you found it?

CN So, I got into it because I had just become a novelist and I wanted to learn how to read properly. I've done a couple of failed readings of *The Scholar* in a couple of places. One, I got really, really drunk that's why. (Laughter) That's like the first reading I ever did was in a student union bar. And I've done a presentation in front of this class of people, students and then I hang out with them at the bar before the reading which was in the evening which is a bad idea. And they just kept buying me pints and pints and pints. And then like I went on stage and I was really drunk. So, lots of things went wrong you know like everything went wrong. I tripped on the stage. I answered my phone on the stage. It rang and I actually answered it while I was doing the reading. I did all sorts of crazy things. But weirdly enough, people though, oh, he's really authentic and they bought loads of books because of that. But I knew that my reading was really bad. I never read. No one asked me to read. And in fact, in the process of reading, I heard my own words for the first time, like out loud, and I've never done that. And I was like, why haven't I done this with the whole, entire editing process that I can hear things that are wrong. So, I went to this guy called Ric Sahara who lived in Ladbrooke Grove. He had an old postal sorting office that was converted into a theatre. And someone told me to go and see him, the Arts Council are in that area. I went to see him, and I just said, "Please can you help me with my reading?" So, he spent about 15 minutes with me telling me basically to slow down you know be louder. And then he said you know so where is my play then? After he said that, I was like, "What play? What do you mean?" (Laughter) And he said, "Well, I'd like you to write a play for me." And I wasn't really interested. I've done drama at school. I've done all right. I got a C. (Laughter) But they've taken me to lots of theatre at the Riverside and the Lyric and we've seen Shakespeare and all this stuff and I was what, you can't do what I want to do in the theatre, in plays. It's not compatible. It's very that, and he said, "No, no, you can." And so, he encouraged me to write this monologue which I wrote for Carol Moses who I believe you know. And yeah, and actually, Carol came up to me as well independently and said that, "I'd like you to write me a monologue for this festival that North Kent Arts are doing." I said okay. And then she said, "You got to meet the director I'm working with." And it was the same guy. I was like, "Oh, you're taking me to meet the same guy." And so, we all talked about it and then I wrote this monologue called *The States of Mind*. And Carol performed it. Well, actually, before even Carol performed it that day, when we did the first rehearsal and she got up and she did it, I was like, okay. Wow. We can do this. These two things can go together. This really works. And that was me. I was sold on theatre there. It's still my big passion, big love.

PC In theatre, the writer's words go through the director, set designer, you know, all of that, publicists. Whereas with the novel, you speak really directly to your audience who you know it's a very immediate context. How do you feel about trusting your work to go through so many other artists?

CN Well, as you know it could go wrong. (Laughter) But I am quite a social person, I believe, maybe a little less social than I was in those days. In those days, I was hyper social if you want to call it that. Do you know what I mean? I hardly spent any time in my house. I was always out and about and I was always with people. And the idea of writing a novel and being away from everybody, it was eight months. Sometimes, it was a year or so and just

me and myself. It's really brilliant because I have the artistic control but really bad for my social life. So, I felt that working with a group of people on a project, I could kill two birds with one stone. I can be like, I'm being social and I'm being creative at the same time. And I actually loved it. And if I ever really felt like, oh, I really need to be in control of anything again, I'd write a short story or I'd write a novel and that was my thing for me, by myself, where I have total control. This thing is when I want to be collaborative, when I want to work with other people, when I want to bounce and stuff. And we became an ensemble company for the next, like 10 years or so, I think it was. At least eight years and yeah, I wrote maybe 9 or 10 plays in that time. And we would do a play every year. And it will be like, we'll do the play. We'll put it on. And then immediately, once it's finished, we say, okay, so what we're doing next time around. And then we start to work on the next play, kind of like carnival. Do you know what I mean? And it came around, it was the same time we did it. It's just for off the carnival, I think the first time and then we'd start again you know. Okay, so, what's happening next year? What's it going to be about whatever? And we would rehearse right up until we develop it and then we rehearse up until we did it, yeah. So, it was a real luxury.

PC Malcolm Gladwell has this idea about, you know, 10,000 hours. It sounds as though you're putting in your hours just making theatre which is how you develop the craft really.

CN Definitely, yeah, yeah. I definitely had much more access I think than a lot of other playwrights had because I had actors who can say the words when I want them to be said and a director I could talk to directly. Yeah, we work with set designers, all that so it was very hands-on, practical working on plays rather than just being like in a creative writing class or something like that you know. So, yeah, yeah, I put in those hours. And then how do I feel about it? I mean I don't know. I don't want to be too disparaging about...

(Laughter)

PC Well, we did notice it when you're awarded the Roland Rees Bursary. You said that you had just about given up on writing a play. And I kind of wondered what had prompted that.

CN Really just not getting any commissions. Just not being asked to do anything, not being asked what I might like to do, fighting to get commissions, even after that, you know, I didn't get any more commissions. Just really trying to like really bang, bang, bang on the doors of theatres and stuff. I just said to myself, you know what, this is maybe a waste of my time. And I still love it. I still go to it. I don't write it right now but I know I could because I'm writing. I mean I just left the page before I came here. I'm writing every day, every day. So, I'm still quite shocked. It's not that I've not done it but after years and years and years of int the door, banging on the door, banging on the door, I kind of feel like I don't want to do that anymore. It's not the best use of my time.

PC Can I make a confession? You and I both wrote *Sweet Young Kisses* which was the exploration of love between couples of various ages. I took the oldies. You took the young ones.

CN Yeah, yeah, it was the young ones, yeah.

PC And it was a really successful production.

CN It was.

PC And nothing came of it.

CN No.

PC How did you feel about that?

CN I was upset at the time because I felt like I was there every night. I used to go every night as well. I would talk to people afterwards and people would tell me how much it meant to them and how happy they were to see it and not just Black people. It was like loads of different people saying that. And it was really, yeah, it was really successful. But we also did, I think we did one play there as the Post Office Theatre as well which was hugely successful. It wasn't just even just not getting any commissions in that sense you know. It was like when we were putting on the things, it was all the stuff we had to deal with to actually just put the play on. So, you know people will be like, oh, you know you can only two weeks because you're a small company. And you know if we gave you three weeks, it probably wouldn't work. And then afterwards being like, you know what, you could have really done three weeks. (Laughter) Because the box office sales were so good and whatever. And it was like sold out and people wanting to come in and couldn't come in and all that. We could have extended the run afterwards and all that kind of thing and just the general attitude of you guys are... Riggs, my director has called it poor cousins. We were like the poor cousin of theatre all the time and being made to feel like we weren't welcome. I think that's changed a lot. I think a lot of that has changed for a lot of the younger playwrights now you know, Ryan and Jasmine, and people like that who are amazing, amazing writers. I see things are different for them and they're having these successes. I said to Jasmine, "You are the, you're the person that we dreamed about coming." Do you know what I mean? In that sense which is being able to put that kind of play on in this kind of space you know. We hoped that this would happen and really, I really meant that. Yeah, because it's so much about who we are as Black British people like their plays you know what they're doing. They're really bringing that to the forefront into a wide audience. But at the same time, it is weird to feel like you know that's what I was trying to do. And not just me, there was loads of us at that time who were trying to do the same thing who were successful as well in terms of like being in the theatre for....

PC You're saying it in the past tense and I think that it's not in the past tense. You are a playwright. And I think there's a space for voices that are not necessarily under 30.

CN Yeah. Is it? And I think that's what I've got to offer actually, yeah. That's what, if anything, if I was to bring anything to that table right now, it would be being able to talk about who I am right now or some things that happened before. But actually, it's funny in the screenwriting and stuff, I'm starting to do that. I've realised I've got a wealth of knowledge about what was going in the '80s that is just completely untouched and a lot of, I've been talking to a lot of directors about that as well. But also, just like now like what it

feels like to be myself now in this time, I feel like I can talk about that as well. And also, the interaction between someone of my generation and someone of the other generation. I would really love to see a play where everybody's in the same play. So, like you know the people of my generation, the people of the generation that came before me and the people that came afterwards in one big play epic. I would like to write that play.

PC Okay. You're going to have to. (Laughter)

PW Definitely. Can we talk about *Small Axe*? How did you get involved with that?

CN I'll try and break that down. Actually, it's really strange because it came out of a play. I had written a play, *Look to The Sky*. It was a teenage play for Half Moon Theatre. It's on Limehouse and its ward. And in the promotion of that, I met a woman called Helen Bart who was a journalist for the BBC and she interviewed me for that. So, Helen Bart went on to be a researcher on *Small Axe*. And so, one day, I'm at another playwriting course, initiative and stuff and it was in Sheffield. I was there. I think I can say this much. The play I'd written had not gone down very well. And this is literally what happened. It had not gone down very well. I had a discussion about it in which it was like, we don't really want to do that. Can you do something else? I was feeling a little bit down about that and then someone came up to me and handed me a little piece of paper and I took it. And they said someone called for you. Here's the number to call them back. And it was Helen Bart who's called from Steve McQueen's office about the Steve McQueen project. And I was like, "Are you kidding me?" Because for all of those years while it was happening and the stuff that I heard about and all that happening. People have been talking about it for years before it happened especially in the creative industries. I wanted to be involved in that and I knew I wasn't going to be involved in that because I didn't have the credits. I didn't have any things. For so long, I've done books and even then, I think I was between books. So, I had nothing to offer but I thought I was right for it. And then this piece of paper came to me. And I went out and I called Helen. And she's like, "Do you remember me? I came to see *Look to the Sky* at Half Moon Theatre. And I was like, "Yeah. I actually do remember you." And we talked about it. And she said, "Do you want to come in?" And I was like, "Are you kidding me? Do I want to come in? (Laughter) You don't even have to ask that question. When do I come in?" And so, and this is the other thing I say to writers if any writers are listening. During that time, I hadn't really, I don't think I had a book out in years. My book had been out, and the last book was possible, and that's 2013. And even Temi Oh asked me about this, "There's a big gap between books, 2013 and then." And it wasn't for want of trying. Do you know what I mean? And so, but during that time, I wrote every day, every day, I wrote, screenplays. I wrote short stories. I wrote novels. I wrote plays. I'd written a couple of plays in that time. So, I had all the stuff there. So, when, because I was saying one day, I'm going to get that knock on the door and I need to be ready for that knock on the door. I need to have something to show in whatever, wherever the knock comes from. When that knock came, I had a screenplay and a couple of short films that I'd written as well. And I gave them that to look at and they looked at it and they said, "Yeah, we like this. Now, you have to meet Steve." I was like, "Do I have to? Really? I thought we're done.

Like you liked the screenplays, right? Why do I have to meet Steve?" "Because he has to decide whether you know you guys can work together." I was like, "Oh, but you said you like my stuff. Can we just be done? Can there not be a next step?" But of course, they couldn't. And then I had to meet him. I think it was about six months later. Yeah. And we had the conversation about the project. And that kind of went well. I thought it went really badly at the time. I came out of it. I literally came out saying, you really missed that screening. I really missed that out. But I didn't. And yeah, I got the job basically. And then it was writer's rooms and discussing the whole thing and me being really green because I hadn't had the experience and so I felt like I blacked my way into the room, you know, in a sense, because everyone else was super. They've done films, they've done this and then we just got on with it and they were really kind everyone in the room was kind and then we just we just worked.

PC Can I ask a craft question? How many drafts.

CN Of each episode, I'd say it was about 27, 28.

PW That's amazing and scary. Was there, at any point during those drafts, you just thinking I'm not getting this it's...

CN Yeah, yeah. No, no.

PW You just keep going forward.

CN No, I think I did. I did *Red, White and Blue* first. The feedback on that was really good. I felt really good. That's when I first was like, wow, I remember the 80s really well, you know, I mean, I actually, there's so many things I've forgotten. There were scenes that didn't, didn't even make it in, like I really wanted with Leroy or he was in the car with his dad. I wanted him to have a pencil and a TDK and just be winding it. I wanted to try and get to the start. But no one knows what that is anymore. Try and talk to my kids about it. That's like dad. What are you talking about? So all of those little nuggets of things that just have forgotten. You know, telephone boxes and just having to go in that box or wait outside and all that, you know? That these things and the little tickets that we used to get the little yellow tickets, you know and. You know, for the for the bus and the train. And I just could remember so much obviously because it was my childhood, so and I'd forgotten about it. I'd put it aside and I concentrated on now and then doing *Red White and Blue*, it just unlocked all that stuff. So not only was it like in a craft sense? I was feeling pretty good, but you know, just as an artist, I think I felt like, wow, I've just got this thing. I'm excited again, you know? You know, I feel good about what I'm. So we did that. And then, yeah, after that, Steve was like, you know, can you do *Lovers Rock*? And so yeah. Yeah, I definitely want to do that. It's very controversial, as you might know, which is good, I think. I think it's really good that it has that it. It stirs up that feeling in people. It definitely stirred up that feeling with me. I actually thought that Leroy was going to be the difficult one. I thought that that, you know, *Red, White and Blue* was going to be the one that people get upset about. I didn't think they would ever get upset about *Lovers Rock*, but, I don't know, I just felt with that creatively, I felt like. I kept it quite safe. I kind of wanted to prove myself with *Red, White and Blue* and

prove, I could just do a film structure, you know, I was the only person, like I said, who'd never written a film. I've never done it before. I just wanted to be like, okay, I can do a screenplay. And just play safe, really, you know? And then when I got the opportunity to do *Lovers Rock*, I was like, all right, now I could do the other stuff that I do like. I'm going to break some rules. I'm going to mess around, I'm going to, and Steve encouraged that, even in the room. So I'm really going to just like, I think I know what he wants. I'm thinking to myself, and I think that's what I want and I think we're going to go nonlinear story. We're going to do all kinds of the set pieces. And just make it more atmospheric like you said and make it more about the feeling, the vibe, rather than about story. It really wasn't about plot, it was about just immersion and also abstraction for me. Just making it abstract. I wanted to write an abstract film. Oh, I said this in an interview that me and Steve were doing and Steve didn't know I was going to say it. I just came out with it, but I've wanted to work with Steve since about 2002. When I saw his artistic work, I saw *Western Deep* and I was blown away. And then obviously I saw *Hunger* and stuff like that. But I said at that point in time, I said I want to do a Black British film, this art house abstract film, about being Black British, set in London with him. And so, when that time came around, I was like, I got my opportunity to do the thing that I always want to do. I'm gonna do it. I'm just gonna go for it. And yeah, he liked that. So, yeah. Then we just vibed together on it. It's cool. Fantastic.

PW So you've talked about writing books, plays, and screen writing, so how easy is it to switch from, you know, one mindset to another, to another and what are the challenges doing that?

CN I find them just to be processes. Like the actual foundations of each process are exactly the same. I build character and map out a story, a write dialogue, a write action. All of that is the same, you know, it's just the kind of process. And by that I mean the format in which I put it in. It's the vessel that holds it, basically. That's the thing that that had to change. And so, yeah, with the screenplay writing, I had to tell a story, but from a different, in a different vessel. I had to tell a story in the vessel of okay, the visuals come first. You know all that stuff that you do, the inner work and stuff you can't do. You know the inner work that you do in novels, you can't. People don't know what the character's thinking. You can write it in the action, but no one's going to get to hear it. So you have to make sure that action shows it visually, and that's the difference. That's the thing that clicked for me. Oh, that's when I started. With plays I think, it's more dialogue based. You can do a lot of dialogue work, not necessarily exposition, but the voice is the thing that tells you what's going on more than anything else, you can have action and I love silences in plays. I love movement in plays I love. I said the work that Ryan was doing with movement and all that, you know, like it's just amazing. But yeah, yeah, I think mostly it's the voice, right? It's the voice of the characters that drives it, you know, and novels is the interior voice. Like I said before, it's just more about what they're thinking and feeling and stuff. And that becomes the biggest thing. And if you can write in a way where the action is always still their voice, you know, it's still them telling the story, even though it doesn't sound like it's them telling the story. It's still all coming through them then, then you've kind of cracked novel writing and or fiction, I should say.

PC You're making me think, but one of the things I haven't written yet, okay. This one particularly interests me because you taking writing on as a job a lot of energy and time into it. How have you evolved as a writer? Overtime? Is it? Have you felt an evolution in yourself over the years?

CN Yes, I definitely felt an evolution. I don't think I took writing on as a job, initially, but I don't think I feel like it's a job anymore. I mean, obviously the job it pays me, but I'm always trying to push that away. I'm always trying to be like, I don't want it to be a job. I don't know if you would call it a vocation. It's definitely not a hobby. It's something else. It's like it's something that I do with my life, for my life, which makes me happy and that has to be at the forefront of everything. And I said pretty early on when I after I wrote *The Scholar*, when I was having that, am I going to do this forever or am I not going to do this? I have this thing where I was like if you were not getting paid for this, would you still do it? And I think I've answered that question because I never got paid, for a long time. And I still wanted to do it and I realised it was something that that serves me well. I'm gonna write about this at some point, but I had a really traumatic experience in my life when I was like 19 and yeah, it really changed everything for me. It's the thing that actually was the catalyst that got me started. Writing it was like a life threatening thing. So when I came out of that, that's the thing that I started doing. So it became a way of dealing with that. I've realised now looking back, it came a way of me dealing with my trauma. I've got quite bad PTSD. Now I've got, like, what I'm in therapy and my therapist called it complex PTSD. So it wasn't just the thing that happened to me. It was the way I grew up as well and all the things that I saw growing up, so a lot of people think *The Scholar* is made-up. It's not made-up. Yeah, it was my life. There's like, what was happening. So if you put that in that context, there's loads of stuff that I just buried basically by just.. You've got to bury it. You've got to be, you can't actually. No one actually goes to therapy. Even though I wrote about it in society, even I wrote about someone going to therapy. Didn't you just kind of try and move on from your stuff? And use our...that's what I was doing as a way of self-care, and it became very important to me in doing that, but I didn't realise I was even doing that. I didn't realise I had PTSD. It's only when I heard I heard Dizze Rascal talking, doing an interview one time after what had happened to him and he was talking about the fact that he had PTSD and then I was like, hold on a second, I think I've got PTSD too. So I'm really grateful to him for being so honest about it, because that made me realise there was something going on with me and then I was like, how do I deal with this? So how I've evolved I think in answer to your question is just uhm...I've become more aware of my whole process, my process of writing, my process of being a human being, my process of living, who I am, and I've become less that person who puts stuff into the background and locks it away and acts like it never happened and I was doing quite well at that for a long time until, you can't. There's a point where you can't keep it locked anymore and it just came out. I mean, it came out and I was literally writing script about someone who'd gone through the same thing as me and I was like, I can do this because I've had that experience and I was like, yeah, this is me now and I just started crying, you know, I mean, like, in the middle of writing, like with this poor director sitting there, who's really good about it, man, he was just like, just cool, just cry man, and then I

cried about it and then I was like, okay, I need to go to therapy, and I realised, so I started going to therapy, so I've evolved in the sense as a person in that way and then as a writer.

PC As a writer, the thing that I can clearly see is the evolution of your craft, but also fascinated to hear that you wrote 30 short stories and then put them away because they weren't good enough. So you clearly have a craft presence, but also an editorial head that you bring to your work.

CN Yeah. I got taught that by my writing mentor, Ronnie Mills, you know, I think if I hadn't met him I wouldn't have put those stories away. Sometimes, like with one of those stories, I was really into and he was like "you really like that story. Don't you know that ain't it. He didn't ever say to me that ain't it, but just the way he said it, I was like, wow, I need to look back at that. And then I then I realised it wasn't. But I think that came from him. As a writer, I feel like now as well, I just feel. Some of the things, evolutionary things, that happen to you when you've been doing something for a long time. Are just that, there's things that happen naturally and organically, and you can't say, oh, I'm going to do this, they just start to fall into place, and I think now, after those 10,000 plus hours, things just happen. They just occur and it doesn't mean I don't go wrong. I go wrong regularly but I have more of a I know I can fix that mentality than ever before.

PC That's so lovely.

PW That's amazing.

PC You also do creative writing workshops, so it's not just that you write. But you also teach. What is teaching like for your work? Why do you do it?

CN I used to Teach. I haven't taught for a long time. I stopped about the time when I took on *Small Axe* because it was getting too much for me to do both things and I find it hard to hold. I really love teaching. I think that was another stage in my evolution. In terms of like actually now going to literary theory, I've never done any literary theory stuff. I've never done any playwrighting theory, I've never looked at the mechanics of how you do this. I'd always been instinctive and so having to teach meant I couldn't go in there and blag it. You can do it in a one-off course and stuff, but if I'm doing 6 to 12 weeks with writers and stuff, I better know, so I went back and I just read some books and watched videos and I kind of learned all the stuff that I've been doing naturally, but that obviously fed into my practise a little bit as well. I'd also been a bit resistant to it because I was like, I don't want to intellectualise too much about what I'm doing. I was and am aware of a lot of people who teach in universities say it kind of gets in the way of the process and I didn't want that to happen. But I found it really invigorating. I always have to work with people, particularly young people, but any people and just have that creative space again. It's the collaboration in a sense, because they were working on stuff and I was trying to help them work on stuff. And it obviously had it rebounded on my own stuff, you know. Well, yeah, you can do that or it just made me think, like, you're saying you're thinking as I'm talking being in a room with, you know, maybe twelve writers, no matter what stage you're at, just the act of being creative means that it's going to have an effect on me. And I really loved it the time, the

class that I was teaching at Westminster when, I think, I must have given them like seven distinctions, and then I was going to my second marker and I was saying like, am I doing this because I really like these guys or is this, are these really seven distinctions and he was like no, they are seven distinctions, actually, sometimes that just happens, you know, but I was glad to go out on that kind of high to be like, okay, wow, I've had a really great class. They're one of my favourite classes and they've all been brilliant. But I do think at that time, I can't remember how many years it was, but I was feeling a little bit like I need to stop, that I need to take a I need to breathe again and get out of it for a while and then come back fresh because I was feeling this. They were the best class, but something just wasn't fresh in me again. I didn't feel that same thing to teach. So that's why I stopped mainly. And I want to go back to it at some point in time, but I just don't know when.

PW We're going to talk about something slightly different now. So what does it mean to you to be described as a Black writer? Is that something that you accept or reject, particularly when you kind of put out *The Scholar* and it was described as an urban novel?

CN Yeah, well, I knew they didn't mean that geographically, and I was always saying it does have a geographic meaning. It is urban in that sense. It's not just this thing happens to black people, this happens to everybody in this situation. I like being called a Black writer. I don't have a problem with it, to be honest. I mean, like I said years ago, it's the most obvious thing about me. So, I mean it's kind of like, you know, other than being a man and being short and wearing glasses and stuff like that, it's one of those things. It's just, yes, I am that, that's fine, I think. The problem is when people start to try and define you according to the fact that you are this thing and that's what I find difficult. But no, I don't have a problem with it. I know some people have a problem with it. People have a real problem with Black British, you know, and I think that's weird as well, but I understand it. But I don't feel that myself.

PC You describe yourself as a literary activist. What does that mean and what does it entail?

CN Yeah, this is slightly apart from the work that I do on the page, the creative work, and I wouldn't say I'm that now. I don't. I don't do any kind of activism at the minute. But I think at that point in my career, when I was saying that I was really about just doing work off the page like being a lot of work with say Kadeja George. Or you could just say in terms of like putting on events, doing the workshops with people facilitating other writers. I was at the Post Office Theatre. I would hold these kind of soiree spaces where we'd get a load of writers to come in and we sit down and talk and reason and stuff and I just wanted people to meet each. Well, I gave organisations like Pen a really hard time, I mean, because I would organise a group of us and we would go to them and we'd say you need to be doing more for Black British writers and this is what's going on for us and whatever I could, I wanted the industry to be audited in terms of what they were doing for Black British writers. I went to Spread the Word and I spoke to them with a number of other people who were working in that field to do a report, and that became the Writing the Future report. I was very passionate about that. That's something needed to be done. So I was doing a lot of work outside of actual creative writing in order to facilitate writers of colour as a whole, I think and marginalised writers, working class writers and whatever, just trying to make things a

bit better. So I would call that my activism, literary activism. I was going on protests and stuff, we had to do all of that, but yeah, I don't do that so much now.

PC Right. We're gonna ask you to do a little horizon scanning first. Now, what do you think the future holds for writers? And what are the challenges and opportunities that you see?

CN So I did a talk at the Black Writers Guild this summer just recently, talking a little bit about that and trying to get some perspective, trying to link what came before with what's going on now. I think there are going to be amazing successes. I think there are going to be celebrity authors. I think they're going to be people who just like ascend to the stratosphere, whatever that means for literary culture. But I think with that ascent, we need to be really mindful about what it is we're doing. And like I said in that talk, I mean, I always thought we would get to this place, but what we do with it is really, really important. And you know, I read a really brilliant article, actually last night, talking about 50 years of hip hop. And it's actually saying that, you know, hip hop has been commodified to within, within an inch of its life, and it is not anti-establishment anymore. And it's not, you know, any of the things that it started off being. And I think there's a real danger with any form of art once it becomes commercialised that that's going to happen, obviously, you know. I don't know so much about being anti establishment. I suppose I am by default because in a sense I'm deeply anti capitalist. You know, as much as you can be living in the UK and stuff. But you know there I think there are different ways of doing things. And I think we need to be mindful of those things. And I'm just a bit worried about, like if people, just wholesale, just like, just take the money. If the money becomes the most important thing, then I think that influences your behaviour and how you view other people and that cohesion that I think is really important for us could be lost. So my speech, which I think is on the Black Writers Guild website, that just basically says everything that I was thinking and that this is really great and I rate what everybody's doing. Everyone's amazing the Youngers have done so well, is built on the basis of, you know, the shoulders of all these other people, but still, you're doing your own thing just like I was. And just like I was standing on the shoulders of people who came before me. But just be careful, basically, about what happens. What comes with the money basically?

PC Is it that we need to be explicit about our value system and also to have develop our own critical traditions so that we are not responsive to other people's critical response?

CN I mean, that's one of the main things actually artistically is just like, how do we form something that we own ourselves? That we're in control of and that there is a lack of control. I see a lack of control in what's being created, you know, like so before, I feel like we didn't have that same connection to the mainstream, but we had greater artistic control, and now I see that we, I feel like we have less artistic control and it would be good to dialogue with the Youngers because I'm sure they don't feel like that's what's happening, but listen, I know for a fact when I published *The Scholar* I published *The Scholar* because of Yardie, you know, I mean, and how big Yardie was at the time and because people want to see that depiction of Black British people at that time, they were really interested in that urban, you know what I called my crack and gun stories. So they were interested in it and I

knew part of the reason why I've hopped genre so much is because I was like, hold on, how do I just not get stuck in that place because I know that's what the depiction of us that they want to see. I was a beneficiary of that because I came from that, like in the sense I've grown up that way. I knew all those stories. I knew how to tell that story really well. I'd had inside experience of that world. But okay. I need to be mindful of the fact that this story is going to be commodified to some extent, you know, and what do I do then? How do I change it? And that's why I think when I did *River*, there was so much opposition, you know, because I was literally told stick to your urban stories, you know, I was told that. So yeah, I know it happens. So I think we need to just be aware. Okay, so what are we doing with this thing that we have, it's really important and it's really important not just for ourselves, but for everybody else as well.

PC And even if we codify something and people object to it, at least there's something to object to And we're not simply floating off into Whatever temptations come our way.

CN Yeah, there's a lot of temptations out there. This is the other thing about being evolved and having been through a lot of the temptations and stuff, you know, I know what's there. I know what's happening and stuff, and everyone's journey is a little bit different but there's a lot, that's the same too, I think.

PW What's next for you, Courttia?

CN More of the same. I worked on a TV show that's just out now, called *The Woman in the Wall* for an episode of that. Yeah, coming next Monday. So that'll be my episode. But I worked in the writers room on that. So you know, that was a lot of fun. I am working on screenplays. I'm working on my own TV stuff. Yeah, just more the same and thinking I want to get back to novels at some point, but I'm actually doing so much TV and screenwriting that I haven't found the time, but I want to carve out some time for another cycle of novels, which, well, a novel and a book of short stories, which would be about Black masculinity, British masculinity. That will be the theme of those. So yeah, I want to get back to that soon.

PW And now we come to our final question, which is a great question, which is what are the best things about being Courttia Newland?

CN Wow, how do I do this without sounding like an egomaniac?

PC You know, mind, you've earned this space, trust me.

PC I am, I think...I think one of the best things would be like integrity. I think I'd like to think. Loyalty and Stubbornness, stubbornness.

PW Stubbornness is good, I think, in when you use it. In the right way

PC When you have to be to be a successful, right? There has to be a little nut of toughness right in the middle.

CN Yeah, yeah.

PW Courttia it's been great having you on the podcast. Fantastic to talk to you today. Thank you.

CN Thanks so much.

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