This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Patrice Lawrence

Patricia Cumper British Writer and Journalist, Patrice Lawrence MBE, is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Born in Brighton, she was brought up in an Italian and Trinidadian household. Her first book for young adults, *Orangeboy*, was shortlisted for the Costa Children's Book Award and won the Bookseller YA Prize and Waterstone's Prize for Older Children's Fiction. *Indigo Donut*, her second book for teenagers, won the Crimefest YA Prize. Both books have been nominated for the Carnegie Medal. Her novel, *Eight Pieces of Silva*, won a number of awards including the Crimefest YA Prize, the inaugural Jhalak Children's and Young Adults Prize for UK Writers of Colour, and the Woman & Home Teen Drama Award. Her most recent novel, *Needle*, was shortlisted for the Yoto Carnegie Medal. Patrice has worked for more than 20 years for charity supporting equality and social justice, both themes that inform her writing. Patrice Lawrence, welcome to The Amplify Project

Patrice Lawrence Thank you for inviting me.

PC Tell us a little bit about your background. When did words and stories become important to you?

PL I think like many people's backgrounds, particularly if you're the first in the UK to be born here, it's quite complicated. So my mum was the second youngest of 12, born in Trinidad, but she was the only one who came to England. So she came to Brighton to train to be a nurse. Then she met my biological father who was born in Guyana, brought up in Barbados. He had quite a difficult background because his mum was Indian, his dad was African, I presumed they're not married, so like stigma everywhere, so he came to England to train to be a nurse. And they met, they were 20, 21, no family—maybe. So my dad left her when she was pregnant and my mum was sort of in that situation, where you've got no family, being in Brighton in the late '60s, unmarried, all of that stigma. So I was privately fostered from the age of four months to four years, in a white working-class family in Brighton. And my foster mum, Auntie Phyllis, taught me to read from when I was very little, joined a library, so she always encouraged words. And my mum was always known in her family as "Why is Vera always reading?" My mum is a massive reader. And even still as adults, it's our love language. We send books in the post to each other. My mum was obviously brought up during colonial education in Trinidad, so my mum was really into Keats and Tennyson. We were one of those houses that just always had books. So, books have always been part of my life, stories have been part of my life. But also, when you grow up in a very non-traditional even for, our own community is non-traditional, you're trying to find places for your own stories, so I always used to write—always used to write poetry, always used to write stories. So, whether I was published or not, I think stories are what I do.

Pauline Walker What was the first piece you wrote where you considered yourself a writer?

PL And what's really interesting because there's a writer that—I know you've interviewed, for I think season 2, called Dean Atta? And a while back before Dean had written his books and before I was published, I met him and said, "Oh, when did you consider yourself a writer?" And he said, "As soon as I start writing," but that's so male. I still struggle. I say I'm an author, I now do say I'm a writer. I also wonder it's because I just didn't have those points of reference to consider that, I was someone who wrote, but to be a writer seems so much more. Writers didn't look like me. When I was growing up, of course all the children's books I read were by writers who were white and dead, and I didn't want to be dead, I wasn't going to be white, so how on earth could I insert myself into this? So I suppose I do and I'm 10 full length books and lots of other stuff down the line, I now say I'm a fulltime writer even though that involves many other things. But it just felt something, a title that just didn't apply to me because I didn't see me in any other writers.

PW But you trained as a writer. We know you've got an MA in writing for film and TV, and you were mentored by the BBC. How did that shape you as a writer?

PL They were very intermittent. I, again, did things all the wrong—well, I don't think it's the wrong way, just a different way. I went to—and I was accepted in university when I was 18, it was to do Psychology and Sociology at Bristol even though I loved English, so I didn't go to university then because I thought that isn't what I want to do. So, I came to London when I was 27 to do English and History of Art at Goldsmiths and that was, "Oh, what?" And to do something like History of Art as well in London with so many free galleries**,** and, also, if you're not from London, you come become like a tourist, so there were stories everywhere. You don't take London for granted. Just sit on the bus and listen to people speak, you want to write it down, you're going to a building, there's so much history you want to write it down. So London encouraged those stories. I did the master's when I was 32. I actually applied and then I found out that I was—I found I was pregnant, and I was working fulltime, so I did it the next year with a six-month baby and a fulltime job. So, it was literally, very literally, breastfeeding, like the little baby latched on and writing my dissertation with the other hand. But I've got a distinction for it. But again, obviously that was early 2000s before the internet really took off. And I had no idea how you got into that type of world. And the BBC, I think the BBC was a scheme to support writers who wanted to write comedy for Black and Asian audience, but I think what they wanted was standard sitcoms but with brown and black faces, and without our various points of reference. So it was a different time from now and we'll do something with just black and brown, you know. So it was interesting, and it made me slightly think that's not the world I could get in because I have no idea how to break into the film and TV world, it's not easy, particularly if you need to work and earn money at the same time.

PW But the skills that you've learnt, have they been useful to you?

PL One of the things when I do workshops with other children and young people when I talk about writing stories is I think about Black Panther, the film. It's almost like a perfect three-act structure, , about how the world was before and then a threat comes in and the threat escalates, and so they virtually pushed him over a waterfall and he's dead, and then it comes up. So film for me actually, that structure, about how you write. And I do, when I write longer books, do use a three-act structure like that. I think, "How do I escalate the threat each time?" And also I think for, any type of writing, it just makes you think, "Where are the stories?" So I watch things quite critically and think about, "Oh yeah. Oh, that's an idea. Oh, that's good twist." No, that was rubbish. So it does make you quite critical of all types of storytelling and helps you improve our own practice.

PC What does it take to write for children, how do you go about that?

PL So I was lucky enough to be able to get an agent before you had to submit a whole polished book. Goodness knows how people do that now because once you got a deal, then you're editor helps, how do you do that? That's why there were so many expensive writing academies now, whereas I was exempt from all of that. And I tried lots of different things and it just didn't work. And my agent is lovely, and she just said, "Look, now, Patrice, let's now publish your," now it's 75,000 words, "No, Patrice, not good enough, never 75,000, I can't do this." So my second love is genre and I love crime books. And I went on Arvon Residential Crime Writing course with Dreda Say Mitchell and Frances Fyfield. And I had these two ideas. One was a series of crime novels set in 1940s Trinidad, Port of Spain, because it was just around the time the American base was there and places start to be gentrified and immigration was starting. And you think if Alexander McCall Smith can do it in Botswana, surely I can do it with Port of Spain. And then I had another idea, I was going to do also a series set in 1930s, Hoxton in East London because I used to live there, and I did a project researching in the History of Hoxton Hall and Shoreditch, and I'm a real geek. I love history and I love archives. I have my characters, I have my maps, and I had these two ideas and I went to the Arvon Writing Course, and there was one exercise that we did where we had to pick just a sentence out of a hat. And because it was crime you had to write it and hide it like a clue. And my sentence was, "He woke up dreaming of yellow." Apocalypse and the Simpsons, what does this mean? But a couple of weeks before there'd been a teacher's strike and being an incredibly responsible parent, I'd taken my year 7 child to Hyde Park Winter Wonderland, and it was so expensive. And my child is very much a Hackney child, like, "That's a scam, we're not paying that," I'm like, "I know." So eventually we wanted a hotdog, and they only took cash, and it was those ATMs where they charge you £3.25 to get your money, like no, I'm not having that. So we managed to get one hotdog between us. So with the yellow suddenly I thought mustard and I thought those tokens that they have in fairgrounds, so I free wrote these couple of paragraphs with a 15, 16-year-old boy called Marlon, he's going on a date with a girl that he's not—his first date, way above his league, she's putting mustard on his hotdog, he hates mustard, but he likes the girl better. And then suddenly the beginning of *Orangeboy* started. And during the course of a few days that I was there, I wrote more, just free wrote it, and I had no idea where it was going. And I just thought it was a crime book, but my agent said, "Oh, it's YA, young adult." So it actually was a pure accident. And then my child came into the teenage years and like, "How can I steal your stories? How can I steal your friend's stories?" And sitting on London busses, listening to conversations, all of that just sparked so many stories. And then my child did that terrible thing and got older, was no longer a teenager, so still I started writing younger. But I love children's books. I think I get quite frustrated that there was still almost like a hierarchy with literary writing at the top and children's books at the bottom.

PC That's exactly what I was going to ask you about. I follow Michael Rosen on Twitter and he makes the point constantly that there is no respect for the writing for children and young adults, and yet it is technically exceedingly demanding.

PL It is. And I think we're not only creating the future readers, we're creating the future writers because we're going to schools all the time and r whether you're going to school in Exmouth or you're going to school in Bow. And I talk about, when I do school visits, I show pictures of my various families, my stepdad, we had a fish and chip shop in Littlehampton, we're not posh, we're certainly not white. Well, not all of us, and it's a way of just saying, "Actually, you have stories, and you can be a writer and your stories are important." I mean, Michael Rosen is amazing. And I'm so pleased that he got his strength back following COVID to be able to carry on with the activism because it's so important.

PC How long did it take you to write *Orangeboy*?

PL I started in 2011 and at that time I was part of a writing group, a really hardcore writing group, And also again I was working fulltime, I was parenting. And I just free wrote it because I had no idea where it was going. I wrote it initially in third person as well. And a couple of people said, "Actually, Marlon sounds like you, Patrice." No, he's called Marlon, he wears trousers, no, he sounds like a woman. So I had to re-wrote 78,000 words in like first person and actually I could be Marlon, I could sit on a bus and think, "If I was a 15-year-old Black boy, how are people looking at me? What are their perceptions?" I really changed it and then I changed it again and re-wrote it because I had no idea how to write a full-length book. And it really took time, but it was on spec, so it was fine. It wasn't published until something like 2016. But by that time, it had quite a lot of drafts with my editor as well. Because also the thing about *Orangeboy* as well, when it was written, no publishers wanted it. It went to all the major publishers. And it wasn't an issue with the writing, it's the main character was a young Black boy, none of the editors come anywhere near that sort of demographic, none knew what to do with it. And the one person who acquired it, Emma, who is actually now a really good friend. She grew up in Streatham. Her parents were Baptists. So, she's from a multi-ethnic background. She recognised the bus route which is really important in the book. She'd never acquired a book before. She was covering somebody's maternity leave. So, all of those weird, strange luck things, but she was absolutely passionate about it and really advocated for it. Hachette is a massive publisher, so she told me afterward she had to go to the salespeople and hand sell it to them. But they're the only people who wanted it, so it really made me slightly cynical at the time about—well, I still am—about the publishing industry.

PC Can I ask you a craft question? You said a couple of times free wrote, what does that mean to you?

PL It means where I used to get a pencil, a pen, and I just start writing. So, there's a sentence or a word and it's just emptying out my head, so I don't look at my spelling, just carry on writing and see what comes out of my head. And I still do that quite a lot if I'm blocked and I need to get on from something and I ask myself a question, or. With one book *Rose Interrupted*, I used to get my child to send me prompts on the phone and I used to just free write, or I put my characters in that passage and not caring where it went to, and usually actually I find a thread of what I want to write about.

PC It's funny, we use that technique in theatre as well. It's basically called improv.

PL A member of our writing group, that writing group I was part of, was a improv actor, so I think I got it from her, so that's probably why actually.

PW It's just a way to free you up, isn't it?

PL Yeah, absolutely, yeah. I find some really good stuff in there when I'm just writing without purpose.

PC What's different about writing for young adults rather than children? Because you've written for both.

PL That's really interesting. And that's the thing that I'm still working on I think, and also what's different from writing for adults in a way. And it's not about writing down. With writing for young adults, I think, for me, there always has to be consequences of certain things. So I remember reading Guy Gunaratne, *In Our Mad and Furious City*, and there's three 15-year-old boys, and for

instance they refer to women as gashes and, some of the language I found quite difficult, but it's a book that is marketed to adults. Whereas if that book was marketed to teenagers, there had to be consequences I think for some of that behaviour. And I think as a writer for children and young adults, I feel incredibly responsible for the young people that read my books. And I really feel strongly about do no harm. Obviously with young adults you can deal with more serious themes in a more explicit way, you can make it longer. For children, I think with the *Elemental Detectives* which is a serious set in, 18th century London. There's a big discussion with my editors at first, there was not enough peril, and I thought, "Hold my letter, I'll get the peril in." And then it's like, "Is that plague monster too scary?" So, there's again, feeling that responsibility for your readers. But I think the other thing for both young adult and children, it's about hope. I really feel it's important there's hope at the end of books, so that's incredibly important, because you don't want to write Hamlet again, do you really? Like you know, you wade through 300 pages, and everybody dies for goodness' sake, like no.

PW Too much tragedy.

PL Too much, no.

PW Talking about the *Elemental Detectives*, the books have been described as history and fantasy woven together. So how do you go about creating that fantasy world for your characters to occupy?

PL I started thinking about them during the very first lockdown. And as I said, I'm quite nerdy. I love history, I loved—and again because I wasn't born in London and didn't come to London until I was in my late 20s. My way of navigating London was literally walking the streets and working out where things are, and then I'll stop suddenly and it's like, "Oh, look at that." I'd have to say at this point that my child has recently, as an adult, diagnosed with ADHD. And I said, "You can't have ADHD, you're just like me?" And then I read up a lot of about how it manifests in women, I thought, "Oh, okay," you know, because I will be that person who are like walking, "Oh, alleyway, what's down here?" So I think there's a real perpetual curiosity for me. During the first lockdown, I read a lot of books about 18th Century London because I couldn't go walking, so I could read them instead. And then I really loved Ben Aaronovitch's series *Rivers of London* which they are crime book set in contemporary London, the main character Peter Grant is mixed heritage, and it's with magic but not twee magic in anyway whatsoever. And it's also London that looks like a London I know, not Richard Curtis's London, so it was full of all people I recognise. So I wanted to mix Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* with the film Inception set in 18th Century London with 13-year-olds. For me I always start with characters, who are my main characters. So Robert Strong is inspired by Jonathan Strong who was a real life enslaved young man who was bought from Barbados to London, badly, badly treated, left for dead, found a clinic in Barts that treated him and met Granville Sharp and William Sharp, and they paid for his hospital bills in Barts for three months and found him a job with an apothecary. His old so-called owner had sold him on saw him looking healthy, kidnapped him, held him in a small prison on poultry and was about to send him back to the West Indies to virtually die on a plantation. He got word to the Sharp's eventually and it was a whole court case, and it was agreed in the end that he was not an enslaved man. But in the end, he died in his mid-20s, nobody really knows why. Granville Sharp went on to be this massive abolitionist and, he deserves his flowers, he's got his big tomb. But Jonathan's voice got lost. I found out about him when I was researching Shoreditch Church where he was baptised and I thought, "I did not know this story." I somehow wanted a character that could represent him and give him a voice, so that was Jonathan—sorry, that's Robert Strong. And then Marisee Blackwell came from looking at a map of 1746. I told you I'm a geek. And up towards Clerkenwell there was a place called either Black Mary's Hole or

Black Mary's Well, Google, it's on there, I'm sure, and there's lots of reasons, but one of them that it could be like a Black woman who might've looked after that well, so I thought, "No, that Black woman is going to have all the wells." So Marisee Blackwell's grandma is a keeper of London's wells, so she has to look after all the wells and make sure the water's sweet. And you've got the elementals, you've got the water spirits, there's Chads, named after St Chad, who were a bit grouchy because a lot of the rivers are filthy, people throw their old cows in there, they're being covered over. You got the air spirits, the Fumis, who want to waft around but actually again a lot of the factories at the time are starting to pump some muck into the air. You've got the dragons and I wanted to do different dragons. So they made up like almost like tardy grey, small tiny indestructible beast that come together and form a dragon shape then scuttle away in between the cobbles, and overhear people's conversations. They hang out in the City of London though. And then you've got the Magogs, the earth spirits who are two giants asleep at the bottom of the Thames. And a lot of this just comes from, I look at different types of London law and just how you can personify parts of London. And of course, they're all at war, they have to be really.

PW It sounds like there's a lot of plotting to do, a lot of outlining of what the story is going to be. How do you deal with that?

PL I'm rubbish at plotting. And I think with *Elemental Detectives*, a bit like *Orangeboy*, the initial one was done on spec, so actually it frees you up to play with things. So what I always do actually with all my books, I start off with the characters. And I think, "What do they want?" So the goals might change but I need to have that pull. Then I think what do they fear? And then I try to give them something because obviously as a writer if they fear something, you need to throw it at them all the time. And then I sometimes try and get them something tangible that's precious to them. So in *Orangeboy* for instance, it's Marlon, his dad died when he was young, the record collection that's sort of passed through. And with *Elemental Detectives*, Robert has memories of his brother, and he loses those. So those are things that I use as milestones, and I use the three-act structure and ask myself questions about what would happen here. I sometimes sit on buses, and I do like a mind map of what are the possible things that could go wrong here and then use those. So mostly for me it's asking questions about what could happen? What's next? That's what I remember Dreda Say Mitchell actually saying at the Arvon course on crime, for her it was like, "What's next? What's next? What's next?" And that actually keeps it quite simple because I know some people have beat sheets and they have this and it's like, "Oh my days, it's a bit too complicated for me." I just need to work out what's next and I'll put it on a post-it-note and I'll change it around on a wall that will do me.

PW So there were two books in the series, and are you planning any more?

PL Yeah, the idea is four. So, each sort of the elementals will get their moments. So, in the first one it's the rivers in case one, so it's the Fumis, the air spirits. We've got the dragons, the next one which will involve plague rats, I'm so looking forward to writing. And then I'm not quite sure, obviously I suppose the giants who might arise out of the Thames in the fourth one, but yeah, I haven't got there yet.

PC I like the idea of those giants, I live by the Thames. You can see as the water goes down that there's something over there.

PL Yes, absolutely. (laughter)

PC Well, we're going to have some fairly general question now that we ask everybody. Do you consider yourself a Black Writer? And if you do, what does that mean to you?

PL I do. And I know there are lots of conversations about this. But one, if you look me in the face, you can't, deny it really. And I suppose it depends on how much you politicise that. And I suppose, growing up, looking at the book, children's books around which are actually quite harmful to me. And when I, again, when I talk in schools about how I loved writing but how I can never see myself as a writer. So there were books like the original Dr Dolittle's by Hugh Lofting. And the ones that I've read were the original ones written and illustrated by him, so *Dr Dolittle Goes to Africa* which, is not going to end well really, is it? One of the characters is called Prince Bumpo. Bumpo's backstory is that to get a princess he must bleach himself white. I read this when I was six. But also, the illustrations are so awful, has such a strong memory of looking at this king and queen trying to think about—they look like orangutans trying to think, "Is that supposed to be me?" And if you're that young, you've never seen yourself and you only see yourself in golliwogs and other books like *Little Black Sambo* which is still around very much, all of those things, it actually has—, even 50 years later I think about it and I'm furious. And again, I think as writers including, you know, I've done picture books as well is that picture books can be really transgressive. So I actually want to bring all my blackness into what I write because I just think we—you know, there's still a lot of anti-blackness in society, there's still hostility. And there's things that my parents dealt with when they came in the '60s, I think they're surfacing now. And I'm furious that my child has to deal with that. So I will absolutely say I'm a Black writer, a Black children's writer because I know that I can use that. And *Needle* actually also won the Little Rebels Prize which is for books that are very overtly promote social justice and I think that underlies all of my books. So yeah, I'm most definitely proud of it.

PC Well, that's definitely leading into the next question I want to ask which is, you tell the Windrush story in *Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush*, and you talk about African History in *Our Story Starts in Africa*. Explain to us why it's important for children to learn about these stories?

PL Because I think a lot of the stereotypes are still there. One of the jobs I did was I worked around equality in early years, so I used to develop and co-train courses on encouraging early years workers to discuss skin colour because there's still is—if you're not from a minoritized community, there's still the idea of children don't notice colour, they're innocent. I got called my first racist name when I four when I started school, I can argue that point. And the thing is, it doesn't matter if you notice skin colour. But actually, what we know from so much research is those hierarchies kick in pre-school. So for me books can be that tool to change that. And I of course grew up in the '80s where the idea of Africa was famine and corruption, and we needed Live Aid there to sort out those African countries that weren't—nobody told me about the scramble for Africa and how we got into this mess in the first place. I knew none of that. And the stereotypes can still perpetuate. So I think, the *Story Starts in Africa*, the brief was write the story of the African continent in 800 words for 4 to 6-year-olds. Oh, go on then, but I spoke with a brilliant, my friend, actually Emma, the one who acquired *Orangeboy* and she's a real geek like me, so we spent a month, we listened to all the podcasts, we watched all the YouTube, you know, whittled down how we could tell. We knew that we obviously didn't want to focus on enslavement but actually that is a massive part of the story. The thing we said with the illustrator, "No shackles, I'm fed up of seeing our people shackled." We don't want to see that, but to actually have the emotional side of that. Getting the scramble for Africa because we need to know about all of those things. And it was a learning curve for me because there's so much I didn't know and I love, I absolutely loved that. So if you can get that to a 4-year-olds as opposed to like 56-year-olds definitely some early years sense, they're still quite

squeamish to have those discussions but you can use books to do that as well, so I think they're incredibly important. And also, the little Black kids there feeling proud of themselves and who they are. Again, so important.

PC When we were doing a project at the National Maritime Museum, we were told that you don't say slaves, you say enslaved people, and that absolutely set off a light in my head, of course. This was done to them. They are not that. This was done to them. And I think, your storytelling is along those same lines of empowering language, rather than using language to create unpleasant images, shall we say. How do you distil the research that you do into your writing so that you can tell these stories to younger readers? How do you distil it down?

PL It varies. So, where the *Our Story Starts in Africa*, we had so much research, because there's so much there. And it took it—and that was a collaboration really between me and my editor. We had a whole list of warrior queens that we wanted in there, so we had to pick our favourite warrior queen, and then really focus on—so with *Our Story Starts in Africa*, also because I'm not directly of African heritage, obviously, coming from the Caribbean, a little bit there. And also, I didn't want all my Nigerian friends to go, "What are you doing writing that?" So I set it in Trinidad, because also that was also useful for enslavement discussion as well. So I wanted to get the character Paloma to Trinidad. And the first time I went to Trinidad, I was six, and it was for my granddad's funeral. And having grown up in Sussex, in the late '60s, early '70s, it was like, oh my days I'm going to go somewhere where everyone looks like me. My mum had 11 brothers and sisters, lots of cousins, my grandmother – she was terrifying – and nobody could understand a word of my English accent and I couldn't understand my cousin's Trinidadian accent. So we just looked at each other. And I use that framework for the base of the book about how would you feel part of a family if you don't. And for a lot of people like me who were the first generation here have been caught in that, in that; you go to Trinidad and not Trinidadian, and you're in England and you're not English, it's like where do you belong. So we had to, in the end, think what do we want to say? So, we want to say that there were these fabulous empires before, that the continent was incredibly rich, that actually, humanity possibly started there. So, give us a bit of credit. We wanted to make sure also that we got in the technology, and there still are these myths about in… and some children's books where a very underdeveloped Africa, that Africa doesn't have towers, you know, all of that stuff.

PC Oh, it's what we call Africa the country rather than Africa the continent.

PL Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. A bit of Maasai and a bit of, around the hut and that's it. So obviously, the whole purpose is to challenge that. So we had to think in blocks about what we used to say this bit, what we used to say that bit, what we used to do that, and then whittle it down. But also have the luxury that I could have a really long glossary at the back, because some of the things around enslaved were down a scramble for Africa, and also what is empire and what it means, and the conversations around, Africans took slaves of each other, they helped, we wanted to actually be able to have some of those discussions, but they wouldn't fit in a book so we actually got the glossary to do that, which helped a lot, and didn't count towards the word count so that was good.

PC Yeah, it's a huge topic.

PL Absolutely, and it's a starting point. And with the research for the *Elemental Detectives*, because it wasn't commissioned, I could actually just have great big fun, and I know I had a pad before, oh, the dearly deceased Paper Chase. I had this lovely sort of notebook with lots of different colours, and so I read lots about churches and laws of London, how street names start, like the history of Hyde Park, the gallows, everything possible, every angle, and tried to piece my story, because also the point was they go to different parts of London, so you're thinking, what's there? What was in Hyde Park? What's Piccadilly there? Oh, it's a peril, you know, all of those things. But a lot of it was just plain geekery and didn't get in a book, I enjoyed it.

PC Do you write an awful lot and then edit down? Are you one of those? Or do you work essentially what's in your head and then you…?

PL Yeah.

PC Yeah, you're one of those.

PL I hear some people say, oh, write 120,000 words, I was like, really? Wow, you know. I don't always write chronologically either. I try and write the ending, not before I've ended, so I actually know where people are going. And that might change. If I haven't got a full map, I need a destination. And then sometimes I just write, if I'm feeling a bit sluggish, I'll write the bits that I want to write. So it's a bit like, those episodes for Friends, "This is the one where…" So I write, "This is the one where Robert almost gets eaten by a plague monster in Hyde." And so I just write that and I love the description of that. So I don't always write it chronologically, but no, I don't tend to overwrite at first, I tend to underwrite. And quite often I'll get the notes I'll get from the editor, well, actually might need more emotion there, or need to clarify that.

PC I have to say, I enjoyed *Needle* very, very much. Simply for that directness and clarity, it literally drives along. I've been reading it and I thought, oh my God, I'm this far in, without realising that I was reading. I really enjoyed that one.

PL Thank you.

PW What difference does recognition by way of awards and honours make to you?

PL To be honest, I don't really know. I think, as a pragmatic thing, publishing and children's publishing is quite competitive, and the publishers tend to like the shiny and the new. And so, there is that fear, that no matter what you write, something shinier and newer is going to come along. So I think it gives you a bit more longevity as well. I think, again, for children's writers, because our advances aren't a lot of adult writers, there is a lot of money that will go to very, very few people. There's a big, very controversial sector around celebrities writing children's books or having their names on children's books that somebody else writes. You know, so there's resources that goes there. And I think it enables me to carry on doing what I'm doing, but also, it lifts my profile with schools and

with librarians, and I really do like doing school visits. So, I haven't even got a website. I keep thinking, oh, I'll get one. But if I'm on Twitter, that's fine, they'll find me somehow. And so that lifts your profile as well. And there's a lot of regional awards that are run by librarians or children's librarians as well. So I was at one in Falkirk earlier this year and I'm in Leeds and other places. And I think it's a way that librarians can get some money to bring a group of writers in that will do school visits or answer questions. And again, I like that because I just think it's a way of encouraging young people to feel that they can be writers, but also to feel seen. I was doing an event a few years ago in Liverpool, and it was in a Catholic school, primarily white but a few young women, Black young women at the back. And I was talking about growing up in Sussex, there'd be like no hair products for my hair and then another time I set my hair on fire, and that was as a grown adult, you know. And there were a lot of them that go, oh my days. I talked about the racism in the books and, and at the end, one of them just came and was chatting to me and her teacher was there and she was telling me about her experiences of racism, and the teacher had no idea that this happened. And I think I can say the things that they can't say sometimes, and bring that awareness in the school, and particularly if there's so few of you, you haven't got that, that momentum. So I think the awards just give me that safety net that enable me to do that. It also validates me in a way, because all those years thinking that I couldn't be a writer, because you don't see writers like me, it says, well, maybe actually I'm okay, I can do it. And it's lovely. It's really lovely. And the Little Rebels one actually is my favourite, because for me, social justice, we've built in we can get in there.

PC I'm going to go technical again now. What's the relationship between an author and illustrator? Because certainly with the books for younger children, they are beautiful, and I love the images, but how do you work with an illustrator? Do you write and then they illustrate? How does it work?

PL It varies between publishers and also, again, it's sometimes quite a pragmatic thing. So, the first book I wrote was *Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush*, and it was commissioned ages ago. It took me a while to get into, how do you tell the story? And then we changed editor for maternity leave and that sort of thing, and we actually really wanted a preferably UK Caribbean illustrator that had obviously related to the subject, that was really important. And, I don't know, do you know about the illustrator Dapo Adeola who wrote (overlapping conversation).

PC Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

PL So this is before Dapo. I mean, Dapo has only been on the scene really recently, but he's done so much to uplift and raise the profile of black illustrators. Publishers talk about all the things that we've been hearing for years - there's more that we should do and we're listening...do something! And Dapo did do something, he's done all his anthologies. So before he was there, we looked, for someone. And one of the issues at that time was some of the few illustrators that there were had a very flat almost manga type style that wasn't right for that particular story, then we found someone, which is great, and then she pulled out. And so we thought, okay, we'd have to go to America … So they went to America and

found Camille. And it turned out that her grandparents are Trinidadians. She's got a connection. And then we looked at her beautiful painterly, and I had no connection with her, which is a real pity, but her illustrations are absolutely beautiful, and I think they really work. And I so wanted a yellow coat that bought one from Sports Direct like last year, just to match *Granny's*. With *Story Starts in Africa*, because it was also going to be published by Abrams in the States, they actually wanted an illustrator from the States. So I had actually nothing to do with that. And it was quite difficult as well in some cases, because for instance, I said, well, how would Tanti Janet look? They said, like the body of Andi Oliver, and I thought maybe that reference doesn't go to the States. I'd have like a Pinterest board like Andi Oliver and all her clothes and her glasses. And there was a whole discussion actually around the word enslaved, the discussions with, the US publishers. And then with *Is That Your Mama?* which is, these are all different publishers because I've got no shame and no loyalty. So, *Is That Your Mama?* Fiz Osborne, who's a really lovely art director at Scholastic said, "Oh, would you like Diane to do it?" And I've seen Diane talks like, "Yes, please." And she said, "Do you want to talk to her?" And, because publishers can sometimes be, "Yes, did you want me there?" I said, "No, we'll just have a Zoom and have a gossip." So literally, me and Diane had a gossip on Zoom. I sent her some photos from my house, because *Is That Your Mama*? is about a family that's very multi-ethnic. So, me and my two brothers are all different shades. My stepdad is Italian, and he's the fairest Italian that you have ever seen. I mean, fair, fair. And he's always referred to me as his daughter, because he brought me up since I was five. So, people look and look at my mum and look at me, and he's the dad of my two brothers but they're both very different colours. So, I call him my baby, 41-year-old brother. He's very dark, darker than me, whereas my other brother, Lee, is kind of mid shade. So we'd go around Sussex and people could not work out, particularly as I'm so much older than them as well. So I sent Diane photos of my family and we had a conversation and she did the roughs. And she's just amazing. Absolutely. And we actually did an event together in Newham, which is the first time we met, because she lives in the West Midlands. I prefer that process of being able to have that conversation. Because I'm not arty, I can't do art direction, but for clarity about what did I mean and… So yeah, I write the text first and then the publishers work out what to do with it. With *Is That Your Mama?*, it was quite interesting, they worked very differently from the other two books. They put the text in a design on a page already for where the illustrations could go, whereas the others didn't seem to do that. So, again, it was quite a learning curve for me about the different ways that publishers work. But I loved having contact with the illustrator. I just thought she worked—I just love her pictures.

PC I think in that one, she also did a little bit of, if not storytelling, amplifying the story.

PL Absolutely.

PC So you had so few words, but the illustrations amplified what it is you were saying.

PL Absolutely. And I think that's what a really good storybook does. It's actually everything tells a story. So the illustrations don't just illustrate your words, they tell more. I mean, the father in *Is That Your Mama?* has got the best eyebrows in the world, they deserve their

own Instagram account. But then she put in a cat and then she put in these stars on the front. And there was some feedback from one young reader saying they love the stars because they're not perfect. So now actually I do an activity with the stars where children can draw a star and it doesn't have to be perfect with themselves in the middle, and then you take different aspects of the story, like, there's lovely socks that she does in here, so what are your favourite socks? You know, what are the flags that represent you? And that's another little peak of the star. So yeah, I just think she's amazing because she does tell more story, doesn't she? Absolutely.

PW Can we talk about how you found your agent, and you mentioned before, you're not partial to one publisher so how do you find working with publishers, so many different publishers?

PL Well, I'll tell the agent story first, and again, I just think it's one of those lucky things. But also, the other thing, when people ask you what advice you have for emerging writers, the advice is a bit like those adverts that say 10 steps to get rid of your belly fat. Well, one step in this is, actually just be nice, because you don't know how your paths cross with other people. So, I've always loved writing and the first thing that I ever had published was a story like true romances when I was 19. I am the most unromantic person ever, but I got paid 60 quid and I was happy for that. So, I did a couple of those. I was lucky to have a couple of really good teachers, English teachers at secondary school who encouraged me as well. So, I was always writing intermittently. And then the Arts Council had a project called… oh gosh, what was it called? It was one where they wanted to encourage more culturally diverse arts, and they went across these different arts, and they did one in literature. And they had a short story competition that was run between Penguin—well, Hamish Hamilton and Arts Council for writers of Caribbean, African and Asian backgrounds. So, I sent in a story for that. And that got published in the anthology, got invited to an Arts Council table for the British Book Awards the day before – so someone obviously pulled out. But I lived in London. I'd get bus home, free food, free wine. Yeah, what not to like. So, I got there, I'd finished work and I got there, I changed in the toilets, and it's one of those moments where I just thought, I know nobody, this is not my world. And it's kind of quite terrifying, unless you're quite gregarious, and most writers, I know, actually, introvert, and it's the worst thing, you just think, I don't know what to do or who to say. And had a glass of prosecco, still pondered and then had another glass of prosecco. And then I looked down the steps and saw the poet, John Agard. And surreally, I'd met John and Grace in my other job. It was a project looking at the experiences of young people of colour and gypsy traveller, and many young people in education had gone around the country interviewing different groups of people. And a youth worker had set up a group in Eastbourne for me to interview. So I'd interviewed them, got back, saw the two people who had been there. I didn't know John, but I knew Grace, I knew The Fat Black Women poems mostly. So John was there, and it's just one person I know, another glass of Prosecco. So, I wove my way down the stairs and said, "Hello, we met in Eastbourne." And he'd been nominated for something. And Caroline Sheldon, my now agent, his agent, so I got talking to her, I got talking about the anthology. She got a copy of the anthology. I pitched the idea. I had a book for her and she took me

on. The book was rubbish. I wrote it, it was absolute rubbish because I just did not know how to write a book. I wrote four more books, all absolute rubbish. But what she did is she really nurtured me. So, things like educational publishers, like guided reading, I did one of those called *Granny Ting Ting*, inspired by my Auntie Baby in Trinidad, another one inspired by Papa Bois in Trinidad. So, I wrote a couple of those. And that was a way into learning how to work with editors, which I've never done, how to tell a story. And I think she just gave me time. And I just feel really sad that at the moment, because I suppose because advances have gone down so much that agents don't have that time. So they are looking for people who will get a deal on a book so they can actually survive themselves. So I really appreciate the time that she's invested in me and is still fabulous and phones me if she thinks I'm a bit sad or, you know, all of those things. She's really lovely. So, I really appreciate that. And working with different publishers, I worked with one publisher for my YA, but I think you kind of get attached to your editors if you have a really good editor who knows you well. And me and Emma, who acquired my first three YA books for Hachette, actually I've got to wear the ring at the moment, she gave me a little gift with the elements on it just to celebrate *Elemental Detectives*, we WhatsApp twice a day, all of those things. So I think you have a really good relationship with because when you put your writing out there, it's actually quite painful. And particularly if you're writing from a demographic of a Black writer writing young people of colour when publishing isn't, and you need somebody who can understand your points of reference as well, and there's so many stories particularly class is a massive thing in publishing, there's so many conversations around that. So, when *Elemental Detectives* went on auction before it was actually finished, myself and my agent met five of the different editors on Zoom and we had to think about who we would—and it wasn't even about the money, it's like who could I work with, who would actually understand what I'm trying to do and make me better, I think. So, I think it's more about all organisations, whatever they are, have their politics, have their struggles, have their little black squares for, Black Lives Matter. So I think you, find that person, don't you, in organisations, the one that you know will shield you and help develop you. I personally suppose it's difficult also publishing is you have so little control to some degree over your career. So, the publisher will have decided what your advance is, you don’t know how that will happen, your publishers will decide how much marketing goes into it, and you think that, that’s your career, they will decide what PR, they decide whether you get post box or bookmarks or billboards, you know, all of those things. And I find that quite hard sometimes because you put everything that you can. I really want to write good quality books, that's really important to me. I think young people and children do deserve the best, they really do. And when you do go into WH Smith, and see like Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, footballer, footballer, footballer, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, Walliams, footballer, footballer, footballer, Walliams, it’s like, well… I remember when WH Smith sold books. I've got *The Color Purple* from WH Smith, so they did used to sell books.   And when *Orangeboy* was published when I was 49, and so it already had, I obviously understood the nature of work, the nature of organisations, the nature of people in organisations. And I think that does give you a little buffer and it helps you manage your expectations a lot as well and helps you choose your

allies and your friendships as well, which really does help in publishing. But yeah, I've got no shame, I'm not loyal.

PC No, loyalty has to be mutual, doesn't it?

PL Literally, absolutely. Yeah.

PW Can you do some horizon scanning for us now? So what do you think the future holds or writers?

PL For writers generally?

PW Yeah, but also for, young adults and children's writers.

PL I think there will always be people who want to write, and I think what's struck up since a lot of MAs in creative writing, lots of things like the Golden Egg Academy that encourages different types of writing. Spread the Word, I was a programme manager for Spread the Word for about a year, which are the writing development agency in London. They do the London Writers Awards, which are fabulous and do lots of, grants now for bursaries for emerging writers. So I think writing will always be there. It feels like we almost are compelled to express ourselves that way. I think there are obviously different ways that we can do it now. I listened to a lot of audiobooks during lockdown. I found it really hard to read non-fiction, but I wanted somebody to tell me a story straight into my head. I think when people have got, "Oh, the end of books," whatever, I don't see that yet. I still feel we go through different stages in our lives, we want different things, and I think, a children's book, a picture book, it doesn't work on a Kindle, it doesn't work on a machine. That moment of having a child with you and you turn a page together, you point out the pictures, you go backwards, a book has got to be a very tangible thing then. I still think the future is great for writers, and for YA writers, you've got more people coming through. It's much more diverse then. And I didn't start that long ago, but I think when I started, *Orangeboy* was published, in my particular publishers there was me, John Agard, and one other writer of colour, and a big, time being published. Now there's loads coming through. And also, much more Southeast Asian and East Asian writers – well, not more, about four, coming through, but there's nothing but four so people can tell their own stories and also set them in the UK as opposed to, oh, you're a Black writer, can you write in Africa? Oh, you may be Chinese heritage, can you set it in mainland China? Like, no, I'm born in Ilford, you know? So actually, you get more writers now coming through, telling those stories, which I think that's actually quite uplifting. The way, you know, people tell stories, even, you look at TikTok or something like that, that you can tell a story in so few seconds, and that's great. You know, I love it, absolutely love it. So stories will always be here in their different formats. And for me, I've always loved crime. So, I would hope in the next five or six years, I will write some crime books. I'll go back to those stories setting, particularly one set in East London, because I can't afford to go to Trinidad at the moment and do more research. I did that before in Arts Council grant, and they don't hand it out so easy these days. And I love crime as a genre, whether I'm writing it for middle grade, for young adults, or for adults. So I think that will be my thing.

PC Can you survive financially as a writer?

PL As a children's writer, I can, because I do a lot of events. And I think that's a big thing that people really do not—they talk about diversity, but they just do not talk about money. And if like me, I live alone, I have no financial safety net, I have to survive by myself and support my adult child. And so, as a children's writer, you can do a lot of paid school events. I do a lot of festivals as well. I like doing that. And when you get to, the age that I am where I don't have dependents, it's like, yeah, I can go here, I can go, you know. Like this month I'm going to go to Wigtown in the borders of Scotland to do a couple of events. And then, before that, I'm going to be in Devon doing some school events. And, I go up and down here. And I love that because I can see other parts of the country, but also see that one kid of colour in a class, you try not to make eye contact. I remember what it was like at that time. We know what it means to be there. So yes, I can survive that way. But also last year, I wrote four books, I had four books published. I had *Elemental Detectives*, *Needle*, *Story Starts in Africa*, and *Granny Came Here on the Empire Windrush*. So, if I keep to the multiples, like, yeah.

PC What's the best thing about being Patrice Lawrence?

PL I'd like to say lucky though I've worked hard for it, is to be able to have a career or something that I absolutely adore doing. I could complain until Christmas about the nature of the publishing industry and this, that and the other, but actually, I can go into Waterstones and see—well, actually, my mum can go into Waterstones in Haywards Heath and say my daughter wrote that, which she does. And considering Richard Osman is from Haywards Heath as well, she has to weave through lots of his books to get to mine. But she makes sure that those people who work there know that I was born there as well. And if you think about, the things that we long for when we're young and that we want to do, how few of us get to do the thing that's our passion, and I'm just so happy that I can do that. And also, you've got no retirement age. So I'm not thinking, hmm, what do I do when I get to 60, 65? I thought, I'm going to—I'll just change genre. I'll do this, I'll do that. So, for me, that's the best thing that I'm actually getting to do. Because I love writing so much and stories and I'm so lucky that I can do that. So yeah, that makes me happy.

PC Would you read for us?

PL Okay. So I'm going to read just the beginning of the second Elemental Detectives book, *The Case of the Chaos Monster*. And what happens in this book, I'm going to read from the beginning, but is that it's a dromedary, who kind of has a big white crab-like shell, a bit like the O2, and spindly orange legs, and a slumber in the Thames by the Greenwich Peninsula. But London's music has disappeared. So the monster, the dromedary, is coming up and is going to trample everything. But at the same time, it was also the year when Wolfgang Mozart and his family came to London in real life. So there's a plaque on, I think it's Wardour Street, one of those streets. And he was very little, but he had an older sister, Nannel, and she was a musician as well but people forget about her. So she ends up being

one of the detectives as well. But I'll just start from the very beginning. So the beginning is called The Stowaway.

[**PL** reads extract]

PW It's been great talking to you Patrice, thank you.

PL Thank you for inviting me.

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