



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker, and Verna Wilkins, Susheila Nasta and Margaret Busby.

**Patricia Cumper** In this special podcast, we shine a light on three titans of Black British publishing. Margaret Busby CBE, Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Verna Wilkins, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Susheila Nasta, MBE, Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

**Pauline Walker** We want to celebrate these women who paved the way, who wrote, published, edited, curated over the last half a century and blazed a trail for today's writers. If today Black and Asian British writers have to be increasingly resilient, these women will have lessons that we can all learn from. We're talking to them about literary activism, teaching literature, recognition of their contribution to the publishing industry, their seminal works, moving on, and the future of publishing for Black and Asian British writers.

**PC** Before we start, let's tell you something about Margaret, Susheila and Verna. Bear in mind these are just the edited highlights of their careers. Margaret Busby was Britain's youngest and first black female book publisher, co-founding the London based publishing house Allison and Busby in the 1960s, with Clive Allison. She edited the 1992 anthology *Daughters of Africa* and its 2019 follow up, *New Daughters of Africa*. She is a recipient of the Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature. In 2020, she was voted one of the 100 Great Black Britons and chaired the Booker Prize judging panel. In 2021, she was honoured with the London Book Fair Lifetime Achievement Award.

**PW** In 2019, Susheila Nasta was awarded the Benson Medal from the Royal Society of Literature. The RSL cited her commitment to seeking out and building a new field of writing through her leadership of Wasafiri and her many publications in the field of Caribbean, Black, British and South Asian literature.

**PC** Verna Wilkins is a publisher and author, having published more than 40 picture books and biographies for young people. She founded Tamarind Books in the 1980s. Her books have featured on the national curriculum and on BBC children's television and been among titles chosen as Children's Book of the Year. Margaret Busby, Susheila Nasta, Verna Wilkins, welcome to The Amplify Project.

**PW** Can you tell us a little bit about your backgrounds when words, stories and books became important to you? So, we'll start with Verna.

**Verna Wilkins** Okay. Well, for me, it started from birth, I think, because my father was a primary head teacher, a very large school, and we had books around the house and words

and picture. And I can't remember when it started for me. We learned to read. We are a colonised island, Grenada being one of the English colonies. My father was very aware that the books that we were given had all come from England, and the images in them had, the picture books especially, had nothing to do with us. It was *Cinderella* and *Goldilocks* and *Little Red Riding Hood* and even the little books. So, he used to make up stories about local events and local things. And because of that, I think eventually I ended up writing. I think I must have started from the stories he made up in the evenings, in the twilight, on the veranda, he would make up all these stories and told us straight off that it was okay to make up your own stories about people like you.

**PW** And what age were you at that time?

**VW** About four or five. And I started really handling books and I remember noticing that some of the stories he told us weren't in the books we were reading. And then later on, as I got a bit older, he said that it was important that we knew very early on that we are of African origin, sitting in a Caribbean island, speaking English and that was such a conundrum. So, it must have been in there without me being aware that I was learning all this from way back when, but it was fun. Both the physical book and the stories he made up, they were just as exciting and enthralling for us.

**PW** And Susheila, what was it like for you?

**Susheila Nasta** Well, I grew up in lots of different places, so, my memory of specific books is actually quite, until I was about 11 or 12, quite vague, although I do remember the usual one part of it was in India, Enid Blyton and reading all of those kinds of books and *Famous Five*. And then we lived in Germany, and I think I spoke a bit of German and I read a few German children's authors. But mainly actually, my interest in books developed, I suppose it developed, quite early in a political way, when I was in a secondary school in a grammar school in a white provincial town called Ipswich in Suffolk. And I realised that there were lots of books on my mother's shelves from India and from all over. But all we got in school was one particular line and I was very interested in English literature. I went on to do English A level and all I ever read was at A level was Foster's *Passage to India*. I had no idea of India, so, I became quite, even though I didn't realize, I was getting politically motivated, I was getting politically motivated. And then when I went on to the University of Kent, that's when it really, and I read Jean Rhys and Derek Walcott and Chinua Achebe, I suddenly realised that these people were speaking to me in a very different kind of way. So, I suppose it was kind of political. And I think because I was half Indian, half English, and I came to Britain in the 1960s, which was around the time Enoch Powell, Rivers of Blood speech and so on, I suddenly became aware of the fact that I was an Asian, although I'd never seen myself as an Asian, so to speak, before and different. So, that's what I think got me reading, really.

**PW** And for you, Margaret, words, stories and books, when were they important for you? When did they start to become important for you?

**Margaret Busby** For me, I think I inherited a love of the printed word and paper from my father, who was a doctor in the rural areas in Ghana, but he'd actually come to the Gold Coast as it was then, from Trinidad. He'd won what was called the Island Scholarship, which meant he could study abroad. He became a doctor. He was in Britain in the 20s and he went to Ghana in 1929, but he kept that love of education and all things printed. In fact, I still have letters that were written to him from the 30s, which he kept and things that he kept all his life. But my earliest memory of books probably, were reading his medical books, actually. I can see lovely illustrated diagrams of the skin and so on, but I can also remember the first three words I learned to spell when I was about four because there was a cousin of mine who was visiting from Trinidad with his parents, my father's brother and his wife. And my cousin David was teaching my elder brother George to spell, and he was saying these words loudly and getting George to spell them. And I can remember those words because I was absorbing it all by osmosis. And those words kind of became a metaphor for me, for life and literature, and they were necessary, fascinating and picturesque, not cat sat on the mat. Those are the first two words that I remember to spell. So, that to me became a metaphor for life and for literature.

**PW** Between you, you've dedicated decades to championing the work of black, British and South Asian writers. What was going on politically and in society that prompted your interest? What were you responding to? Margaret, can we start with you first?

**MB** Well, I came to school in Britain in the 50s because my father wanted to ensure that his children had a good education. And there were no schools where we were in the rural areas. And I was at a boarding school, it was an international boarding school. And I can remember very clearly when I first connected with the fact that I'd seen a representation of an African woman in the British literary world, and that was a South African writer called Noni Jabavu. And I was reading a literary magazine, a literary journal called John O'London's Weekly, and she was on the cover, a photograph of her was on the cover. But that was because it was a very rare thing to see any African woman, any black person represented in the British media in a literary way. And certainly, I had no books at school by black authors. So, that was the climate to me in the 50s and I went to university in the early 60s, and that again was true of my university education. No books on the syllabus by a black writer. So, it was from there that I took the initiative of thinking, well, I'll start a publishing company.

**PW** And Verna for you, what was going on politically and in society that prompted your interest? What were you responding to?

**VW** I think it was in the, it must have been 1990 when I had two young boys and they went to school. And I realised from my background at home what my father taught me, that they too were learning their early alphabet, and they were excluded. They weren't included. And because I didn't grow up in England and you know, I was lost. What do I do? Do I have any say here? And I remember my son coming out of school with a little notebook a This is me book. I didn't know about that. And I said what is it? He said, This is me. We are doing a book about ourselves. This is Me and look here, I wrote my name myself, pointed some hieroglyphics. He said, This is me and there was a circle on the cover of this little notebook

that he was making about himself as part of this cool project and he was painted a sort of peachy white. I was shocked. I said, is this you? And he said, yes, and I said are you that colour? Five-year-old said no mum, but it has to be that colour because it's for a book. I was speechless, absolutely speechless. I had to do something because I had two young sons. Both of them were wrapped up in books because their grandmother taught them about books and she read to them. So, they were very keen on books. There are a lot of books in the house. So, I decided I had to do something. So, I setup a publishing company. I didn't know anything about publishing at all, but I had to do something.

**PW** So, we're going to come on to that in a little bit but Susheila, what are your thoughts about what was going on politically and in society that kind of prompted your interest? What were you responding to?

**SN** Well, I guess, as I was saying earlier, that it was really when I got to university. I mean, I think I'd become aware of race before that, but I hadn't really come politicised although I knew what was going on in terms of the ways in which immigration was portrayed on the media, and I recognised the kind of Ugandan Asians coming in and Enoch Powell and so on. But when I got to the University of Kent, which was one of the few universities, unlike Margaret's experience, very few universities actually taught writing by people like Derek Walcott or Soyinka. I suddenly realised that there was another way of thinking and that to change people's ways of thinking was actually really critical thing and that was linked to education. Obviously, I was having that education and one particular book, which was a writer called Jean Rhys that I read on my course *Wide Sargasso Sea* which everybody will know. There was a phrase in that that struck me. There's the other side always. And then I got involved in an organisation called ATCAL when I did my teacher training, the Association of the Teaching of Caribbean and African Literature, which was the kind of birth organisation that led eventually to Wasafiri. But it was really because, thinking about literature as a way of changing the way people think. And that whatever was going on politically, the main thing was to actually tap into this as a way of changing how people think, because the politics wasn't going to change. We weren't the end of, you know, by the time I was doing ATCAL, it was sort of Thatcherism and a very right wing government.

**PC** It was an interesting time politically. Margaret, can I ask you just really specifically about Allison and Busby? What was the first impulse? How did it develop? It feels quite revolutionary to have decided to do that. Almost as if it was unprecedented, essentially, wasn't it?

**MB** I think it probably was unprecedented. I was still at university, Bedford College, London University, in my final year and I was at a party being given by a friend of mine who was she was actually a writer, daughter of an English woman, I used to stay with in the school holidays. And she was having her first novel published. She was having a party to celebrate it, the 100 Bayswater Road, where J. M. Barrie wrote Peter Pan, actually. So, I was invited as a friend of hers, and she was about to get married to somebody who was an undergraduate, so, his friends were invited along with him. And at the party I was introduced to people doing similar things. I was doing things with my college literary magazine. Here was a guy

from college in Oxford doing things and poetry in Oxford. We're discussing, what you're going to do when you graduate? Oh, I thought I might go into publishing. I thought I might go to publishing. Let's start a publishing company.

**PC** Oh, my goodness.

**MB** So, there we were. I mean, I think I was 20 at the time, and we met up again after we graduated. And because we were so young and we didn't know what the conventions were, that it wasn't a dumb thing, we didn't know anything about it. We just knew that we're interested in books, and particularly poetry. In fact, that was the era of the sort of Beat poets and things. So, we wanted to publish books that young people like us could afford. So, we thought, okay, we'll start with some poetry books. So, we had three, five paperback poetry books. We didn't know how many copies to print. We printed 5,000 copies each. So, we had 15,000 poetry paperbacks and no distribution. We didn't know what we were doing. They were set in the electric typewriter and that was our start. It was from wanting to do something that no one else was doing, that we were interested in, that we believed in, and finding a way to do it. We would stop people on the street saying, do you want to buy a book? And it was from there we both actually got jobs with other publishing companies. I remember applying for a job through an advertisement in *The Bookseller*, and I'm getting an interview by post. I applied by post. I turn up at the publishing company. A person at reception picks up the phone, there's a black girl here who says she's got an interview. So, that was the climate in the 60s. In fact, what I'm doing at the moment, I'm putting together some of my selected writings over the past half century. And the first piece I wrote in a national publication was in the *New Statesman* within 1966, and it was called *Skin Deep*. It was about the atmosphere that was happening in Britain at that time. It was about unprejudiced. So, it was that whole situation. You were not meant to do things like that as a young person. Especially, not as a young African girl, as they used to call me. The girl from Ghana goes into publishing were the headlines. So, that was the climate, and it was unprecedented because I didn't know any better. I wanted to do certain things. We published those poetry books. The first novel we published had been turned down by publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, maybe 40 publishers. The author was introduced to me by a friend of mine. I was about to get married to a jazz musician. In that era if you went out with somebody once, you got married. And this friend introduced me to this writer called Sam Greenlee, who he'd met on a Greek island. Sam had written this novel called *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* that no one wanted to publish. So, Sam was directed to me in London. I borrowed £50 to pay for him to come. And we said, okay, Clive and Allison, and I said, this is going to be our first full time novel. So, we left our jobs. I worked on the manuscript with Sam Greenlee and that was our first full time novel in March 1969, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. And it was almost a diversity parable. The CIA realising they didn't have any black employees, and all being criticized for not having any black employees. So, they employed this black man. They trained him up. He was there prominently by the door so, everybody could see how good they were and meanwhile, he was organizing guerrilla fighters in Chicago. And we didn't know any better, but we thought, let's get this serialised in a national magazine paper. So, we sent it to *The Observer* saying,

would you like to serialise this first novel we're about to publish? And of course, they sent it back saying, we don't do first novels like this, and we wouldn't do a black power novel like this. So, we sent it back saying, you're wrong, and they ended up doing it. So, it was all that feeling of, yes, we can do it. You know, nobody can tell us we're not going to do it, we're going to do what we believe in and that was the way we started Allison & Busby that was the impetus behind it, doing things that we wanted to do and nobody else was doing, but we knew were necessary things to be done and fascinating and picturesque as well.

**PC** Susheila, Wasafiri, that's a ferocious accomplishment, I have to say and I'll tell you, even from in Jamaica, it was something I used to pick up at the university bookshop. It has a formidable reputation. Tell me about how you went from being part of that teaching association to Wasafiri?

**SN** It grew out of it. I mean, basically ATCAL there was a moment in the late 70s, early 80s, rather similar to the moment now, unfortunately, in a way, unfortunately, because things are changing, but where there was a push to get more books by African and Caribbean and Asian writers into schools. And so, this organisation was a pressure group that was getting London University to change its syllabus, getting Cambridge to change its syllabus and so on. And that went on for six years. It was started actually also at the University of Kent, which I should say, talking of histories, some of the people involved with that original organisation had also been involved with the Caribbean Artists Movement. So, there was a kind of longer trail behind Wasafiri, if you like, of push from people I knew and who supported me. Some of them were my supervisors. So, I was on the committee at the end when ATCAL ran out of money and ILEA, which was the London Education Authority, had set up something called a multicultural inspectorate, which meant, in a way, and it was happening in Coventry, it was happening all over the country. So, people began to feel that the original purpose of ATCAL was no longer so important and that other people were beginning to do the job and it was been funded. So, I just remember a meeting at the Africa Centre and I said, well, in that case, why don't we start a magazine? And it started off as a pedagogical thing to carry on the debate, but to get more and more people to talk in its pages. And you have the first issue there. And we launched it at ATCAL Conference. This sounds rather like Margaret's story. We launched it, we had no money. I'd never been an editor before. I had absolutely no idea about magazine publishing typesetting, proofreading, nothing. I just decided. I think I'd read about William Morris when I was in the sixth form. Actually, I think I really, you know, I really believe in this politically. That's what I want to do. And two or three of us from ATCAL sat in a pub outside the Commonwealth Institute, which was then in Kensington High Street. I think we got 50 quid from the Commonwealth Institute, and we produced that stapled edition, which I launched at an ATCAL conference without the magazines, and I got 100 subscribers. I just said, you've got to subscribe to this. And they said, but there's no magazine. I said, well it's coming. And Earl Lovelace wrote the editorial, which still stands, the Trinidadian writer, and one of the very first pieces in there is called *Do Books Alter Lives?*, which in a way is still what the magazine is doing today. So, I think, you know, it was a kitchen sink corporation. We had no funding for a very long time, but I wanted to reach a wider group of readers than you can do just by doing something in a school or by tinkering

with a curriculum. I wanted it to be an international forum, and that's what was pushing me.

**PC** Did people come to Wasafiri, or did you reach out? Because, I mean, it's so international, and you seem to have spotted all the really successful writers at earlier stages of their careers. Did they come to you or did you reach out to them?

**SN** I think it was a mixture. I mean, I think I was in a privileged position to have been part of ATCAL, so, I'd met a lot of writers. I mean, Sam Selvon, for example, I established a relationship with him very early on. He came to two or three ATCAL conferences. Then when he came to London, he just used to say, oh, can you get me a gig, can you get me some money? Get me some and then I started platforming him. But I also knew Earl Lovelace. I knew lots of the writers because I was on the committee of ATCAL. And so, it was a kind of natural and organic evolution that you then asked them to write. And people like Abdulrazak Gurnah, who's won the Nobel, they all used to come to my house. He was part of the Kent group and he became part of the board. He used to review for us. He never dropped us. Some writers did drop us because they didn't want to be seen as part of the way the mainstream perceived Wasafiri at the beginning was as a ethnic minority journal, so, some of the major writers we published then, you know, they didn't want to be stuck in that particular groove, whereas others already understood what Wasafiri was trying to do in terms of transporting the imagination across different worlds.

**PC** A formidable publication.

**SN** Thank you.

**MB** I've got that first issue.

**SN** I know they're getting quite scarce now.

**PC** Verna, you setup Tamarind?

**VW** Yes.

**PC** I'm always interested in the organisational and production side of things as well, because to set it up is one thing. How do you keep it going? How do you organise it? How do you setup the whole framework that supports it? How did you go about doing that?

**VW** I didn't deliberately do anything, I think. I decided to look at what was available in schools, the books that the children were learning from, I had to look at those, in the school library and I went to the local library and I went to the bookshops and I couldn't find this was the early 70s. I couldn't find anything that represented children, children of colour. I was frightful, very frightened. I was frightful as well. I was frightened. I knew I had to do something, and I didn't know what exactly it would be, but I had to get some books. I had to find a way of getting some books there. If I didn't do them, they needed doing, I'd find somebody. So, I decided to go to schools and speak to teachers. How do you use books in the classroom? What sort of books? What age are you teaching? And I learned from the

teachers, and they were amazing. But that is the time when multicultural Britain and there was a lot of the teachers were becoming aware that they had to do this thing and include children. So, they were very forthcoming and they were amazing. So, I took the first roughs that I wrote and I said, you know, is this sort of story? And they told me for the early years, play group, the preschoolers, and then the older ones, you need pictures because children read pictures long before they start reading words. And that was another shocker. So, I ended up having to work out how to produce picture books. Well, you need illustrators. They told me, okay, with an early years' picture book you have a fantastic illustration and a few words...the emergent reader...and then I went to the primary teachers and said, what do you read? And she said, oh, at the end of the day, when we all sit down after a long day, we have a story. So, you need more words then. So, you need longer stories. So, I started writing to that and looking at other people's stuff and writing and going back to the teachers and said, will this do? And it evolved that way because I had no idea what publishing was all about and what was hilarious after I'd been doing it for quite a few years. My son, I think it was Jenny Murray who was interviewing him on Woman's Hour, and she said to him, what's all this about your mother being a publisher? Because I was lecturing the local technical college, and he said, my mother is completely unfettered by reality. And I was because the reality of publishing was so shocking. If I knew then what I know now, I would never have touched it. I would be too scared, but I didn't know. So, I said, you have to have an ISBN and you've got to do this. And then four colour printing is very expensive but then I got some coverage in the local paper because I did the first few books, I had a small legacy. So, I wrote the first few picture books, got an illustrator to do some pictures, and started and the press picked it up. Black female publisher could sell a few newspapers and, you know, they interviewed me and said, oh, you're a publisher. You didn't look like one. So, that helped and then illustrators and writers started writing to me and said, well, we realise that this needs doing. What can we do to help? So, I had a lot of support coming forward. So, I setup on the landing in the house we lived in at the time, put a desk up. Then I got started, and one publisher got in touch with me and said, look, you need help, if you're going to print picture books in colour. We would piggyback. We'll take your books. We print in China, and it was a third of the price of having to print here, so we'll help you. And this was Child's Play in Swindon. And he said, just send us the proofs, and we do it. So, that helped, and it started to grow but the books were piloted in schools because I'd never go out there with a book. I was so insecure. I wouldn't go out there with a book unless the teachers looked at it and they looked at the roughs. And then when the illustrators came in, we took them together. So, by the time we really got going on the early years' books, the teachers bought them, and we'd go to multicultural exhibitions, and there were centres around the country, and the teachers would come from all over, and we could sell really well because they realised that the books were grounded and that this is what they were looking for. So, that was a help. I never got used to being a publisher, but I guess that was what I was and so, it grew from there. And then we had people like the Spinal Bifida people say, you know, the Spinal Injuries Association saying, well, you know, no disabled parents are being depicted in picture books. You get disabled children but the parents, they have disabled parents who have able bodied children. So, can we give you some money to support you with the



illustrating? So, I did the writing, and they gave me all the notes. The momentum built up like that. Then we had illustrators coming on board who said, can you send us photographs? So, what I would do is get black mums because I had boys, to braid their children's hair, take a picture of the children's braids to send to the illustrator so that they just didn't just sort of [gestures] oh, yeah and that was amazing. And I mean, when we did *Giant Hiccups*, because our giant is a woman. She's a black woman, and she's got terrible hiccups. She could wreck a village when she had a hiccup but the illustrator who did the illustration, she actually said, I want to dress this woman. We sent her cuts, you know, strips of African cloth so, she could copy for the head, scarf, so, they were excited too. So, I had a whole group of people around me who were very helpful, and we had a lot of fun going into schools and doing the work.

**PC** Margaret, I'm going to come back to you now because starting something is lovely, sustaining something is much harder and you've definitely sustained your career in publishing. What are the challenges that you face? We've done lovely things and people have been wonderful, but can we go to some of the challenges that you face?

**MB** In fact, we haven't mentioned the first black Caribbean publisher and bookshop in this country. It was John La Rose with New Beacon Books. New Beacon started publishing in 1966. I started in 1967. Bogle-L'Ouverture or Jessica Huntley, started in 1968. Actually, Jessica and John were both the generation ahead of me. So, you know, what I thought I was doing, I don't know, we became sort of bonded in a way. And an important initiative that came out of that era or later in the 80s I suppose was the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books, which began in 1982 and went on until '95. But the bond that we had between Bogle-L'Ouverture, New Beacon and Allison & Busby, we shared printers. We all used John Villier's press because he was very understanding about us being able to pay, or when we could pay and given the books and so on. We used Errol Lloyd, for example, to do our covers. There was a lot of bonding between us. We were doing different things and publishing different writers, sometimes the same writers. But some of the things that I was publishing at Allison & Busby were reissues, books that had gone out of print, books that I knew were important, that were not necessarily available because trade publishers were not publishing George Lamming or C.L.R. James. I knew C.L.R. James because my father was in school with him in Trinidad, but all his books were, I think, with the exception of *Beyond The Boundary*, were out of print, including the *Black Jacobins* in this country. So, I started reprinting C.L.R. in volumes of selected writers in the 70s because I knew of his value, and I knew that he was important to keep in print. Similarly with George Lamming, and we took on African writers like Buchi Emecheta, and we were publishing books that we knew were important, that I wanted to read them. And it's hard to know how to sustain that. I mean, you say sustain it, I was doing it because I believed in it, but I was actually also being inspired, being helped or whatever, but by seeing what's being done by other publishers, things like the Black Book Fair, sharing, our expertise, sharing, there was a solidarity about it all. And that also included in terms of being an editor. The only other black editor I knew was Toni Morrison, who was an editor in America. And I remember, she came to London in the 80s I think it was when *Beloved* was being

published. And there was a moment when Toni and I were both going to be interviewed for some television programme about women, and publishing, and at the last minute the item was scrapped because they realised that in their eyes, Toni wasn't well enough known. And so, this is how recent her fame was. She hadn't won any major prizes at that point. So, together with a young fledgling filmmaker, **Sindomni Brittle**, we made our own film. I interviewed Tony, we made the film, we sold it to Channel 4, and then she went on to win the Pulitzer Prize and so on. But there was a very, very narrow sort of attention span, if you like, for books about black people, by black writers until they did something that the national press thought was worthy of attention. So, that was the situation in the 80s. We were struggling to get an audience. Wasafiri was important. As I say, I've probably got all the Wasafiri stashed away in my kitchen somewhere, if they haven't been damaged by leaks. But it was important to find all those books that you could identify with, you connected with, that you wanted to give a presence to. So, there was no easy way to sustain it. You just had to do what you could do but my interest was sustained because that's what I wanted to keep doing. Doing something like the anthologies that I did, *Daughters of Africa* in 1992 and *New Daughters* in 2019, were because I wanted to showcase how much talent there was that was not being given the attention deserved not only known writers, but writers who deserved to be better known. So, the first volume did have people in it, like Toni Morrison and May Angelou and Alice Walker, but there were also a lot of writers who were just starting out or who were unknown, and it had a historical sweep. So, it was to show that we didn't just arrive on the scene in the 80s, but we had been writing going back centuries, and that I could do another volume tomorrow to show how many other writers of African descent, particularly female, have been ignored or not getting the attention they deserve. So, that to me, is what publishing is about, this trying to make something public that you believe is important, that people should know about. So, if that's sustainable, I will keep doing it.

**PC** That's what The Amplify Project is about. So, we completely understand.

**MC** Okay.

**PC** Completely understand. It's interesting that we're still having to do it though, which is a little bit sad. Susheila, I'm going to ask you, just reading a little bit of the background, you've managed to form relationships with academic institutions and Wasafiri has been part of that relationship. How do you find your way between all the different worlds in order to keep things going?

**SN** I think, in a way, the fact that Wasafiri, I mean, it's hybrid in a sense anyway. The name itself is a hybrid of Safari in terms of what it means in terms of travellers, but because something like that, this magazine could not have survived without funding, you couldn't sell it for a lot of money, so, it needed institutional support in the end. It was independent for a long time, into the mid-90s, but basically because I was an academic, in part an academic, the academic institutions that employed me, I just insisted they funded Wasafiri. They had to give it a separate office or not have me. It was just like, well, if you got me, you could have Wasafiri. And that was the pattern once it moved out of my house, really, that

was the pattern. And that continued, we did eventually get mainstream Arts Council funding, but at the beginning it was a big challenge because we kept getting these ethnic minority pots, which were both a blessing and a hindrance because of how the money was perceived, what you required to do with it, the reporting that was required. And then eventually, we slowly managed to get another publisher, or rather that publisher, Routledge approached me at the 20th birthday. I think I was doing a book at that point called *Writing Across Worlds* with them, and they said, you're not doing all the subscriptions in the office, are you, and doing all this? I said, yeah, and they said, well, why don't you just give it to us? So, then I said, well, I'm not going to just give it to you with the brand now, you're going to have to pay me so that we have editorial money. So, we've actually got a good deal with Routledge, better than most academic journals. Then they tried to change it to an A5, and I said, no, not changing it to an A5 and that's how it sort of sustained itself. And it's kind of because of the digital age now, I think Routledge sell a lot of articles. I mean, I don't like this because each issue is curated and the Arts Council wants that curation of it for writers, but because of the digital age, people download one article, but they pay money for it, so, that's how that continues. But I just wanted to go back to what Margaret was saying and Verna, really, that to say that really Wasafiri certainly wasn't just me. It came out of ATCAL and I led it for many, many years, but actually I was buoyed up by exactly what Margaret was talking about, by the relationships with John La Rose, with Jessica, with Margaret, with the International Book Fair. And the moment in 1984 when Wasafiri happened, or the first issue was published was when I look at it, now, was a moment when there lots of things happened in 1984. It was a sort of moment of cultural revolution and paradoxically, it was almost created by the aftermath and the living with Thatcherism because, people panicked after the New Cross fire and thought, oh, we better fund these people, we better fund them, give them money, give them money for the arts. It'll make everybody feel better. And so, we got money and then everybody started fighting for the money, which wasn't great, it was divide and rule. So, that kind of collective feeling with people who I trusted and was working with was very important at book fairs, and we went to the book fair, I met lots of writers that I commissioned at the book fair. So, all these things were interrelated and they're very different now, I think there's still large groups of us who know each other and still work together.

**PC** Do you think the difference now is a financial one, that things are just more expensive to do?

**SN** I think much harder to just start something like this, like just say, I think we've all been saying that we just decided to do it. You know, if I talk to my daughter, who's 33, I don't think she could just suddenly say, I'm going to start a literary magazine. People will just laugh.

**MB** She could.

**SN** She could, yeah, but, I think getting the money would be harder.

**MB** You didn't have any money.

**SN** I didn't have any money, but then I didn't, we didn't earn anything.

**PC** The ability to broadcast is easier, but it's still, I think, just to have people earn a decent living is much more difficult.

**SN** It becomes professionalised after with the Arts Council funding that's only with Wasafiri, it became professionalised.

**PC** Can I just ask a slightly more personal question? Everything that you have spoken about requires effort and sacrifice to a certain extent. How did you look after yourself in these times? What were the things that kept you alive? Was it family? Was it good food? I don't know. How did you care for yourselves? Or did you care for yourselves when you're working flat out? Margaret, you're saying?

**MB** No, you don't think about it that way. At least I didn't, I was just doing something I believed in, something I enjoyed doing. And I knew I certainly didn't have any money. I never had any official funding, but I always say what I did know was that your energy was your biggest asset. So, I could work all day and all night if I chose to, because that had a value, and I certainly didn't have an assistant of any kind for a long time. So, I was doing everything, not only editing the books, but doing the covers, writing the blurbs, writing the ads. You know, we had to do what was necessary doing the contracts. You had to enjoy what you were doing. Otherwise, I could have just gone and worked in Woolworths. I probably would have been better off. I'd have had paid holidays and things like that, 9 to 5 job, go home and do nothing. But, you know, I certainly wasn't thinking about doing something easier. I was doing something that I believed in and that I enjoyed. And, you know, all good things come to an end. I mean, Allison & Busby was taken over. It still exists, but it's not got the same ethos that it had when I was one of the co-founders, so, you do something that you enjoy, and doing the anthologies is something that is a kind of publishing that I've continued.

**PC** You agree, Susheila, that it's keeping going, that the work itself becomes nourishing?

**SN** I think, I mean, I've always been split between public engagement and writing academic stuff, but I always found the Wasafiri side of my life very energising. I loved meeting the writers. I loved reading their work. It buoyed me up and that really was the key thing. And I felt strongly, not just politically, but also aesthetically, that their work should be seen. And I was going to keep doing it till we got there. That was really what pushed me and, going back to challenges in a way. One of the biggest challenges, and Margaret will agree, was trying to get these writers reviewed in mainstream presses and that's still going on in publishing.

**MB** Well, that reminds me when Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize, is it 1993? I remember talking to somebody on the Guardian said, who's he? Toni Morrison?

**PC** It's very, very hard to bite my tongue when I hear comments like that.

**SN** Yeah, well, there's a writer, you know, Arundhati Roy won the booker, I got a phone call when I was working at Queen Mary saying, is this the new Salman Rushdie?

**SN** Can you come and talk on this programme? I said, no.

**PC** I like the firmness of it when you say that.

**SN** Well, it was a ridiculous question.

**PC** Verna, was it family? Was it the sheer determination?

**VW** Sheer determination, it was the children because I kept going to schools, to pilot the books and to read to the children. I would take in roughs. I did workshops with the children. How a book is made? How do you get what's in your head onto paper and then to look like that? I went to schools and the children saw the process. I even brought in big pictures of the big four colour printing machines and the boys were really onto it then. That is what kept me going. I remember going to a school in Ealing and I talked to the children, and I read books that I'd written to them. One little girl, a black girl, just sat there. Her mouth was half open half the time, and she was just sitting there taking it all in. She was about 10 and at the end of the session, she came up to me and she said, I read a lot. I love books and I write stories, but I didn't think I could be an author until I saw you today and that shook me. I knew I had to go to the next school. That is what buoyed me up. And then another time, I was invited to a school in the south. Well, I'm a bit of a spatial idiot, so, I went to this school somewhere in the southeast of England. I went in and got all setup. It was World Book Day, and I was invited in as an author. So, I'm used to going and doing a bit of reading and performing with the children. And I was asked to sit in the audience, and I thought, what am I doing here? And I sat there and there was a stage, and the screen was shut and then the teacher said, we'd like to begin now. And they opened the screen and on the stage was a trestle table, and the children were sitting behind. And I thought, what is going on here? Why am I here if they're going to do their own thing? And one of the kids stood up and said, well, it's World Book Day and we've chosen the Book, *Dave and the Tooth Fairy* by Verna Wilkins. They said, and the book, actually we enjoyed it, but the ending gave us some concern because the tooth fairy leaves the job. Now, we all know that we need our money when we lose our teeth. So, we've setup, an interview. And they were sitting there interviewing for the job because it was vacant, and they had to quickly get somebody in to take the job. And I knew nothing about this, and the teachers had to apply for the jobs. You never seen such dodgy wings in all your life, watching the children take on the book as part of the whole process and get on with it.

**PC** The thing that we both learned, doing The Amplify project is the power of stories. My favourite quote is absolutely Ben Okri's, we're half human, half stories. And I think to keep our storytellers strong and to keep the stories out there and just to -

**VW** And to learn, for me to sit in the audience and see the children take on the story.

**PW** Now, we're going to talk about the publishing landscape as it is now. I'd just like to get your thoughts on what you think the landscape is now for Black British and Asian writers compared to what it was when you were starting out. Susheila?

**SN** Well, that's a big question. I think one thing that seems to happen in this particular country, and I'm not talking about internationally, is that whenever there's any social or political unrest, there's suddenly a wave of either black publishing or Asian publishing or diversity initiatives or internships, you know, in the 50s, George Lamming and Sam Selvon. And there was a moment when the Windrush generation of writers arrived and there were women, too, who aren't mentioned very often, but there was a lot of publishing in the mainstream and then they kind of disappeared because the immigration laws came in, in the 60s. And then the same thing happened sorry, after the New Cross fire, there was a big rash of stuff. There was Scarman report, there was McPherson report, and suddenly there were a lot of initiatives. And similarly, now, following Black Lives Matter, and I'm not saying this in any negative way about it, but there's also been a rash of activity absolutely highly needed. But I suppose what I'm saying, really is that I wonder, I mean, if there are changes and there have been fantastic reports and people are much more aware of it and there are more black editors in publishing and there are more people, I hope, who read the books, but as I think Bernadine said in an article she wrote, which there are more black writers being published, but maybe they're being published on narrower terms. Maybe they're still having to write particular stories that people perceive they want to read. So, in terms of the landscape now, I hope, I think hope is the only thing one can have, that things are going to change, because there's certainly no excuse for saying, I haven't got these books on my bookshelf because they're available all over the place. I mean just been listening to Verna talking about how amazing the impact was on those children and what started me was, you know, as I said, literature transforms lives. Writing transforms lives and all the hundreds of people you publish, Margaret, over time. So, I don't know. I mean don't know where it is now, really.

**MB** I think, there's certainly I should say Susheila in that Black Lives Matter moment has had an effect. So, that's we start talking about the last two or three years. And I say that because when *New Daughters of Africa* was published in 2019 and Myriad Editions who published it were doing a lot of events around the authors and I was involved in a lot of festivals and things. And I remember going to a festival somewhere. I can't even remember where it was now, but afterwards speaking to members of the audience, signing copies and there was one woman from the audience, English woman, who said they'd had a talk at this festival from some mainstream publisher who had been talking about normal books and diverse books.

**SN** Yeah.

**PW** Goodness me.

**MB** That was 2019.

**SN** I'm not surprised at all.

**MB** So, although you can see a lot has happened and is happening and many more black writers have been published, one of the things that I don't like is this divide between them and us, publishers and writers. We should be, as black writers or black editors or people of colour from a literary perspective, we should be on both sides of the divide. It's not that we are black writers who need special attention from the publishers. We should be publishers, but as you say, there are more editors but there is still that perception of writers having to do something that the publishers want and there are not enough people within the publishing companies, perhaps, who know how to deal with the writers. Maybe that's the problem. What to put on the cover? What does people's hair look like? What does Africa look like? You know, all those things that are other, there are always surveys being done every ten years, there's some other survey about publishing and we know what the outcome will be before it starts. There are not enough people of colour in the publishing industry. So, the question is, what to do about it? Not just to have another survey.

**PW** What about the Black Writers Guild that's also come out of Black Lives Matter? What kind of intervention are they making, do you think?

**MB** I can't tell you. I don't know what successes they've had. But certainly, I mean, anything that bonds people together with an aim that we think is worthwhile is to be applauded. But I hope it's not a question of the black writers as opposed to the publishers. I hope there is crossover. I hope there's influence from one side to the other. I hope there are more people who want to be involved in the publishing industry as well as writers. Quite often been at events, you know, maybe we're going again back to 2019, where I've said to an audience, an audience mainly of people of colour, said, put up your hands if you want to be a writer? Lots of hands go up, most hands. Put up your hand if you want to be a publisher? Nobody and I think that's the narrative that we need to address somehow, and maybe the Black Writers Guild is doing that. I'm not involved enough to be able to tell you what's happened, but I think until there is more of a presence within the industry, there's a long way yet to go.

**SN** Basically, it all circles back down to education because if the publishers aren't reading the books, still not reading the books at university or in schools, how are they supposed to read them when a brilliant manuscript lands on their desk? It still comes down to them and us, you know, which is really sad and very distressing given how far we have come.

**MB** I think it's, what I do appreciate, is the way the few of us who have been in the industry for decades, like the three of us here, we've all connected along the way and become friends and supportive and, you know, we can name all the others, whether it's Ellah Wakatama or Elise Dillsworth. We know them because we've been in that situation. You go into a room and there's only one other black person across the room and that happened with me and Ellah. That's how I first met Ellah in 2000. So, until there are so many of us that you can't just narrow it down to, oh, look, there's Susheila again. Yeah. You know what I'm saying?

**PW** Yeah, I absolutely do.

**SN** I mean, I think that kind of goes back to the whole decolonising the curriculum thing, which is also a big movement at the moment, but it has to be structurally changed rather than just tinkering.

**PC** And when you say decolonising, what does that actually mean?

**SN** Well, I'm only using it as not my phrase, as you know. But I've been involved in doing that in universities for a very long time, and obviously there has been the decolonisation movement which came with The Rhodes Must Fall that started. But certainly, just on a more local level in terms of the actual curriculum and the syllabuses, there is a move to try and change them within universities. I don't know how much is actually gets back to what will people teach? What do they feel comfortable teaching? How do you teach texts? Well, you can teach Macbeth as a multicultural. It just depends the way how you see it. So, that's the key thing. It's ways of seeing and that's what George Lamming said already in 1960.

**PC** So, it's not just a text, it's a pedagogy as well?

**SN** It's how you see it. He said, you know, I think, I mean, I can't quote him off the top of my head, but he just said that English habits of reading have to change. We have to change our ways of seeing. That was in 1960 in *The Pleasures of Exile*, and it's still the same. In a way what Verna has just been...ways of seeing is that those little kids were changing their ways of seeing through the books.

**VW** Yes, that's why the teachers asked me to come and do books for older children. You know, she said, you're the one doing the books with black children. Where is the nonfiction? And I thought, it's not my responsibility yet, a lot of teachers realize that they need this, but there isn't anything available. But I did the black profiles, a series of seven people, and I did Benjamin Zephaniah, Mallory Blackman, and that was for so, we jumped to the 9 to 12 [years]. I didn't do the typical sporty footballer, which was acceptable. It's there, the children can see it, so, I did those.

**PC** So, there seems to be a kind of interrelationship between publishing and education?

**VW** Yes.

**PC** That I hadn't really understood but I think is really interesting. You've lectured and taught at universities as well or?

**MB** No, I did once talk to people in Bermuda, I suppose if you call that lecturing at the university. But no, I haven't done any sort of formal academic work. I've given talks every so often, but I've tried to spread the word in whatever way I can. I don't think that's something you ever stop doing if you believe in it. You want to be part of the you want to pass it on. In fact, I've got a friend who's 107. That's her big motto. Pass it on.

**PC** Oh, yes. Please stop young people from reinventing the wheel. We're rolling already. We don't need more wheels.



**MB** In fact, one of the things that I find I take greatest pleasure from is when you find somebody, it's a bit like what you were saying, somebody who's been directly influenced by something that you've done that having seen just as I was influenced by seeing an African woman who was part of the British literary scene, to find somebody who said they went into publishing because they read the books I published or knew that I was a publisher. And that happened a few years ago at the London Book Fair. Four or five years ago. Well, I didn't really meet her then, but we were introduced, we exchanged cards and she was South African and she later emailed me and said that she described how she had got interested in publishing books by seeing some of the Allison & Busby books in South Africa and she is now a publisher with ambitions to start her own company and so on. And that, to me, that's its own reward, seeing that somebody can take what you've done and to move it forward, to learn from it, to be inspired by it. It's not to say that I hadn't made any mistakes, but you don't have to make the mistakes I've made. I've made them on your behalf, if, you like. Stand on the shoulders.

**PC** Susheila, you've worked between publishing and academia. Have there been similarities? Have you been able to balance between the two?

**SN** I think they speak to each other pretty well. I think one of the things that Wasafiri was trying to do was to do that was to have, you know, critical articles, critical thinking, creative writing, interviews. So, in a way, they're all kinds of different genres, reviews, speaking to each other and sitting alongside each other. But I think, I mean, going back to the education thing, I think one needs to think about education much more broadly, actually, in terms of, not so much education in the classroom only, but just changing people's mindsets in museums, and I think in the broad world. How do you do that? Because that's the only way things are going to shift and it starts, obviously, in the classroom.

**PC** There's such a huge narrative of sort of Western culture that almost pushes away any other narratives that come within it and the older I've got, the more I realize that how powerful the desire to hold on to that one central narrative is. And each time you try to bring in other aspects, you'll get an initial acceptance -

**PW** There's a disruption.

**PC** - and then the central narrative wants to push through.

**SN** There's people you know, they used to often say, oh, well, Wasafiri was very ahead of its time. You know, it's been publishing all these writers. They're now famous. But it wasn't ahead of its time. It was just seeing things as they are, you know.

**MB** I mean, the writers were there as they are around now. I mean, we're all part of the world. In fact, I hate that acronym, BAME. We're not a minority. We are part of the world. I am the centre of my world. You're the centre of your world. We're not in the margins.

**PW** Well, there's a new phrase, isn't there? Global majority that I think came out of Black Lives Matter when I first started to hear that, global majority language.

**PW** We're going to talk about seminal works now. So, what do you consider to be your seminal work, or works, that you've published and why do you think they're important?

**MB** The most important work I've published?

**PC** Yeah. The one that has had the most influence, do you think? If you don't want to answer, don't answer.

**PW** I mean, you've mentioned *New Daughters of Africa* we've heard about *Wasafiri*. Were there any particular publications that you thought, yes, this has made a real difference or a real impact?

**VW** I think the one that I could think of was writing *The Life of Stephen Lawrence* because everybody wrote about his death. And it was Stephen's mum who asked me to have a meeting and she said, you know, it was all about the dead teenager. He had a life. He was 18, nearly 19. Nobody wrote about his life. And I said, you're going to have to help me Doreen, but I think I'll have a go and the book is still in print. The one I did was when they didn't have the subsequent trial to get the others. So, my book ended and we piloted that in school and the BBC came and filmed it in another school. And the children had read the book, and at the end of the book it said Stephen didn't know his killers and they didn't know him. And that was so powerful that some of the children, especially the black children, just froze. They didn't want to carry on anymore and that book is still in Parliament and it's still ongoing. So, I think that was the one. I think, *The Life of Stephen Lawrence*, we gave him a life and all the things he did, you know, going on school trips and he ran the marathon and all the things. One little boy, a white boy in one of the workshops where the BBC was in attendance, he said, but that could have been me. And nobody wanted to push that further because why do you think Stephen was killed? That was a question. And he said, it could be me. I do all of that and everybody just stopped. What do you do now? It wasn't you because you're not Black and taking it from there, I hope the teachers took it after we left and the interviewers left, that they took it from there with this class.

**MB** And I think I would say, looking it from another perspective, the anthologies because both *Daughters of Africa* in 1992 and *New Daughters of Africa* in 2019 have had such a ripple effect, an influence. I don't even know but just from people who were in the first volume being influencing people who were published in the second volume as well as generational connections such as, the first volume had Alice Walker. The second volume has Rebecca Walker and within the second volume you have both Zadie Smith and Yvonne Bailey Smith, mother and daughter. So, there are those interconnections and also the fact that with the second volume, I definitely wanted there to be this charitable effect. As you know, you were in it, so, are you, Verna and so, I wrote explaining that there was going to be no payment because we were trying to have this charitable effect. And because of that there was an award, the Margaret Busby New Daughters of Africa Award, which was a sort of scholarship with SOAS, School of Oriental and African Studies, which meant that a woman

writer from Africa would get a free course of study at SOAS. And the first person who came through that scheme was a young Kenyan woman called Izda Luhumyo who went to SOAS, did that course she went on, I think she went to Texas State, but also last year she won the Caine Prize for African writing. So, that just shows how we're all holding each other's hands, help guiding each other, connecting. Whether it's as publishers, as editors, as writers, we are all connected. And to me, it just exemplifies what we should all be aiming at. Not competing, not dividing ourselves into them and us. We're all trying to do something that will benefit us all.

**PC** And everything that has come to me through having put a little piece into that anthology, everyone that I've met through it, every event that I've gone to has been about sisterhood, about being together and doing something in a way that it can surprise you sometimes, because you don't always expect to find it. And I found that, really deeply, deeply reassuring. Susheila, did you have a particular one you wanted to mention?

**SN** I'm just going to echo more or less what Margaret said, which is obviously Wasafiri is a chorus of voices from all over the world, they're both, in my time, I don't know how many thousands of writers we publish, they were all collaborative issues with office staff, with writers I was dealing with and so on. And so, in a way, I don't feel there's one thing.

**MB** And it's still going strong.

**SN** And it's still going on and I stopped in 2019. I suppose the only other thing I'm really happy about is that Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* is a penguin modern classic and it's on the A level syllabus, which has taken a while.

**PC** Yes. I love Selvon's work, by the way.

**MB** For radio, you know that.

**SN** Yeah, I know.

**PC** You've kind of led me on to the next question, which is you've all set up organisations, you've all had huge achievements, but you've also all stepped away from them. What was that process like of stepping away and handing over the work that you've done? Susheila, can I ask you first?

**SN** Well, that was complicated with Wasafiri, , the succession started about five years before it actually happened. The Arts Council, of course, worried about it because often with the history of little magazines, when the person who founded it stops, the drive shifts. But I think it was in pretty good shape. It was hard to do it because you're used to holding all the different balls in the air, but there was enough money, it was well setup, so, I was ready to do it. I feel editing Wasafiri cost me the writing of at least three books. If I hadn't been doing it, I would have done other things. So, now I'm happy to be doing other things.

**PC** Verna? Tamarind?

**VW** I got to the point where Tamarind was successful. It had got to the point I would have to go and hire people and offices and do the whole publishing thing. I was worried, what do I do from here? And out of the blue, I was headhunted it was Random House actually, somebody approached me and said, we'd like to talk with you, and we put some great plans into place. And I was convinced that it was strong enough then to go in. And it was a relief because I was exhausted. I was writing, publishing, traveling. I was going to Europe, going to the Caribbean. We went to Vancouver at one stage on a trade mission in Toronto. I was burnt out and I couldn't go on. And it was like a blessing arriving, saying, come on, Verna, we can do this, we'll take it. So, I was able to hand it over and you can check, if you like, where it is at the moment.

**PC** Oh, we did.

**VW** You did?

**PW** Yes. It's an imprint, isn't it?

**VW** It's an imprint of random of Random House.

**PW** Yeah, of Random House. It has legacy. It will continue to live.

**MB** Well, in my case, I wouldn't say I stepped away. It wasn't a choice. Allison and Busby was taken over. We had no money, and we never had any money, but it came to a point where taking over was necessary. I could go into reasons why, but to sum it up, my business partner was a white man, and I was a black woman. So, obviously I just made the tea, didn't I, or something, but anyway, it's still going. It was taken over. It did have a great life afterwards under somebody called Peter Day, who became the boss of it, it now has other management and it's owned by someone else. But under Peter Day, the interesting thing is that David Shelley, who's now the CEO of Hachette, began his publishing career there. So, I think that is where he must have had an impression of what a diverse book list could look like because at that point, all the Allison and Busby books were still there, whether it was Chester Himes or those black writers who are no longer there. But the name is still there. It's, I think, doing well. I don't think my name's been brought into disrepute, so, I went on and did other things with the anthologies and another kind of publishing. So, I'm happy and as long as people don't think I'm a dead white man. They do, if they just know the name because they see the name on the spine. It's like Marks & Spencer's. I have stories, I once met somebody who asked me whether I was a descendant of the original Busby. They obviously thought I was dead. And I remember meeting a young black journalist. It was at a party for Maya Angelou and when he made a connection with my name and the imprint, he said, I never knew that Busby was black. And I went to the next room and met this English woman who said she'd heard me on the radio. I never knew that Busby was a woman. So, there probably are people out there who think I'm a dead white man, but I'm afraid I'm not. I'm a five foot two and a half African woman still going strong.

**PW** And you're on Wikipedia, you're all on Wikipedia actually, which is fantastic, so people can find you.

**PC** Massively on Wikipedia, whilst we doing the research -

**MB** My undercover guerrilla activity is not for public consumption.

**PC** – all the lists, this is the thing we want to come to now, all the awards that you've won, it's kind of like, how do we find our way through that? All the things that you've done, you've been chair of this, you've been awarded, all of you. So, what -

**MB** I've changed a few locks along the way.

**PC** I think the question we wanted to ask, that's what I was thinking.

**MB** No, I do whatever comes my way that I feel I can do that might be useful. But, you know, in fact, there are two sayings I live by. I always repeat them, so, everybody's heard them before. But one is, it's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't care who takes the credit. So, I'm not doing something in order to get some accolade or whatever. I'm doing it because I want to do it. I don't care if somebody knows I've done it, or I don't need to be the only or the first or whatever. And the other thing is an adaptation of a Greek saying that goes something like, society thrives when older people do things. Plant trees under which they will never sit. In other words, plant trees under which you may never sit. So, you're not doing it for your own benefit or to get some award or whatever. You're doing it because you want to do it. It's necessary. It'll benefit somebody. It'll make the world a better place. That's what we all should be trying to do.

**PW** And Susheila, what does winning awards on being recognised or being lauded for your work in publishing mean to you?

**SN** I was surprised to be awarded anything, rather similarly, I think the main thing is really the impact that the work has had on people and continues to have I think where I would become upset would be really, and that's why I'm still on committees and I'm still fighting some of these battles. But where I'd become upset is if things reverted to a degree, that all that work disappears. And sometimes one feels upset politically when one hears things on the radio about national values and what are the national values and that kind of thing. But otherwise, no, I mean, I've just been happy, I think. My father, who died when I was 14, would have been very happy that I did a book on Asian Britain photographic history, for example. So, that means more to me than an award.

**PW** And for you, Verna?

**VW** Yeah, I was surprised, actually. I have a shelf in a display cabinet and I had my awards. What had been given. Some are for early books, which was really lovely, were chosen among the Books of the Year, and the teachers would go to the Books of the Year, and that helped commercially. And then I had a Windrush Award as a small business pioneer that came out of the blue, and I didn't realise that these people were looking at Tamarind and studying what I had done and gave me this award and that shocked me. And then British Business Owners Award, I got out of the blue. I wasn't aware of that, that they were checking it. National finalists in Women Mean Business and that had nothing to do with

colour. And that was run by the it was the Sunday Express doing that. And I got the Nibby, the decibel cultural Diversity award, and I stacked them on this shelf. Well, I had to blow the dust off. But it was, you know, it was good to see them there. I can't measure what success I had with those awards, but there are quite a few of them. But, you know, I rest my case.

**PC** There are quite a few. I mean, in the work that we've done on The Amplify project, we've come across a whole bunch of collectives. There's Obsidian and Malika's Kitchen, which are the poetry ones again, the Black Writers Guild that we've mentioned before. There seems to be a move towards writers setting up groups. From all your years of experience, what advice would you give them, if any?

**SN** As we've sort of been saying, I think the political moment now may be, although very different from the 70s and 80s. Maybe, creating some of the same a similar landscape, in that we have more independent bookshops, more writer's groups, more collectives. I think people are feeling a need to dialogue in that way in order to possibly cope with the post-Brexit world. The kinds of governments we've had, the political situation we're in and that need for affirmation is maybe being created by those collectives as well. I mean, again, when Wasafiri started, you know, the Asian Women Writers Collective started, I think around '84 as well. Southall Black Sisters, you know, there was the Race Today initiative. I mean, they were all happening around that time, and it seems to be happening again.

**MB** I think mutual support is always good rather than competing with one another. And also, to think, why are you doing this? Are you doing it for personal favour? You want to be rich and famous? Or are you doing it for some greater communal reward? I don't know but I certainly think in the era of people competing for likes on social media, you have to think, is that all it's about? Or is there something beyond how many people like you in particular.

**PC** It's been such a pleasure just talking, and actually, what I take from it is a lovely energy that went into it, a resilience that kept it going, and a body of knowledge that I hope we never lose has come out of it. Thank you.

**PW** Thank you.

**MB** Thank you for inviting us.

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