

Ray 0:14

Hey there writing cadets. Welcome back to Season Two of moving right along the podcast by young writers for young writers. We're your hosts, Ray,

Ruby 0:23

Ruby,

Kat 0:24

and Kat. So to kick off our new season, we are being joined by a very special guest today, Shay answers, who is a counselor and writer and is here to help us discuss Black History Month. Hi, Shirley, would you like to introduce yourself?

Shirley 0:38

Hello, thank you for having me. Yes, I'm surely answer this. I am a counselor and writer based in the UK. And this is a good time to talk about Black History Month and other things about identity, who we are and how we write and how we experience words, etc. So I'm looking forward to it. Thank you.

Kat 0:54

And we're all very, very excited to have Sally. By the way. Anyways, so yes, this is our episode today, which we are kicking off with the new year. Right, Ruby.

Ruby 1:04

Yeah, as they say, New Year new eyes, but I promise we barely changed. And the podcast had a really great year and 2021 Since we launched, we made our first season. And as New Year's go, people sometimes make New Year's resolutions. So as a podcast, we do have a few resolutions for you guys. And we're hoping to go more into

video content and actually just to survive season two, so it's gonna be a great can be a great year. And while you're here, Shirley we want to ask Do you have any personal or writing or just any sort of New Year's resolutions you'd like to share?

Shirley 1:40

Mine is around just stay healthy. Because the Yes, I am juggling family, parenting, spousal work clients writing and trying to get well as I age. That's the main thing is to stay mentally and physically well, so that life is, you know, fun and enjoyable.

Ray 2:02

We can all agree with that. For the topic of today's episode, February in America is Black History Month. And although it is November in Britain, we decided to go with the February one in America. But this is a very important month for so many people across the world. and today we'd like to talk a bit about the importance of this month for black authors specifically.

Kat 2:23

And that's why we have the lovely Shirley with us today he has written a book about black British MPs. For those of you who don't know, as I was informed by my American cohosts, like what are MPs MPs are members of Parliament's, and she's also written another one about nicknames in the Caribbean. So now we're going to move on to asking Shirley some of the questions that we have. So some of these questions are ones that we've come up with. And some of these are ones that our Instagram, like people wanted to know. So yeah, let's get into the question. So for the first question, we want to know what made you decide to start writing.

Shirley 2:56

So I've always been interested in writing and words, and I enjoyed writing at school. My dad was an English teacher, so I couldn't sort of leave the writing, I had to come home and continue with speaking properly. And all of that and learning as he actually taught me for a while, which is highly unusual, and very interesting experience. But But I went on to university and always doing sort of degree Master's dissertations and liked writing. And I had it as an idea that one day I was going to write a book or two, and I was working on a couple of projects, and then, but quite hesitant and scared of putting something out there. Because you know, who, who asked me to write anything? Like, what do I have to say, and then my sister passed away quite suddenly. And it just reminded me that life is you have no idea how much time you've got. And when she died, it was just an impetus to okay, you're scared, but just put it out there and see what just do it complete and go because I was working on two, when she passed she helped me with one of them doing some research and nicknames one in the Caribbean. She was living there at the time, and she helped me get some interviews and stuff. So she knew about it. And then the other one came out of her death and me thinking about identity and who we are and how we how we live, etc. So sort of two books were happening, really. But yes, I realize Time is short. And if you've got an idea and you want to put it into the world, have a go and see if the worst people can do is ignore it probably. So that's okay, as well. I thought I can cope with it being ignored. That's fine. The real attention is more. So that happened. That was oh gosh, 2009. And it's been a while and then there's been a long gap from those two books to now. So yeah,

Kat 4:44

that's I think that's a really like beautiful story about how like we all find that inspiration to like find writing and stuff. And you know, is there any matter if people ignore it, because at the end of the day, if it's, it's what

makes us happy? That's great. And we have a question from someone on Instagram. Mkitten17 asks, How did you find your writing style? And what drew you to nonfiction?

Shirley 5:07

I, yeah, I, I like nonfiction because I like the reality of it. I like knowing like with the nicknames, I found people I could talk to about their nicknames. It wasn't, maybe I'm not yet ready to go into a fully imaginative process. I do creative writing myself, I do it in therapeutic writing in workshops, I have the poems, which I've been looking at just in preparing for this. And as I've no I don't want to read a ny of these. But with, with research, when I can say this is somebody's story, it probably links to the counseling side of me when I'm talking to someone about their life. And they're telling me about their issues and their challenges. It's really their story. And with the book and black MPs, it's their story, I don't have to, and I try to tell it balance. And I tried to not be biased one way or the other, just telling the story. And I think sometimes we overlook how stories can tell us so much about who we are, rather than trying to create. But you know, at some point later in life, I may actually put lots of small stories together. I don't think I'll write a big novel, but I think I can do short stories, and I have a few short stories very short. One day, they might become something, but the all fiction is based, inspired by real life anyways. So there is there is an overlap there. But I'm not yet I don't have the capacity and time for creating something from nothing. Right now. It's much easier to interview people. So some of it is time. And yeah, yeah, I love that way of looking at nonfiction like as other people's stories that you're telling. That's like such a really wonderful way to look at it. But our next question is what inspired you to become a counselor? And do you think becoming a counselor has impacted your writing in any ways? Well, I think it does focus on the idea of story, as I was saying, people complete, everyone has this journey that they've

been on with born somewhere, then we've had this experience of childhood, this experience of adulthood, maybe workplace not going well, maybe relationships later in the story just continues, and it changes as it goes along. And I love that in counseling, you get to speak to someone about what's happened in the past, looking back and looking forward where they went to get to and then helping them with this middle bit where there is some some sort of challenge that you're trying to help them unravel. And I think that's inspired some of the writing as well, just, yeah, it's it's very interesting to look at that in a holistic way. I think becoming a counselor was an interesting thing that I did, after becoming a careers advisor. So it was working with young people for a while, and realizing that their challenges some of it was to do with them. But some of it was to do with the family that they came from. And that got me interested in family stories and how young people start life, depending on what your family tells you whether University is expected or you're expected to go to work, we expected to have a professional job we expected to go to get the mirrors and easiest thing that you can get at 16. And so all of those sort of family structures, it made me reflect on how we're raised and how we grow, really. And that sort of brought my interest in counseling to the fore. And I'd done psychology previously. So it was just joining up those bits really together.

Ray 8:14

That is very cool. And the next question is, what do you think are some of the most important contributions that black authors have made to the writing industry?

Shirley 8:22

I think that is a very difficult question to answer, because it always depends on who you are, and what's touched you over the years. So anyone who answers this as saying from their own personal

perspective, which of course is fair enough, but it can't be a it's not, you know, I agree this 10 points, and this is two points. It's just what have I come across that I like is more than the black authors in the writing industry. And that's so vast, and I haven't read, whatever attempted the book in the industry. So it's just because there are so many, and it's, but I was thinking of a few poems I've liked over the years. So I'm still I rise by Maya Angelou is when I really love that's one of the ones that have touched me. I have a dream by Martin Luther King, Jr. I mean, it's very well known, but it's still a powerful piece of writing. There's a poem I've been using and someone else's use in writing workshops called Dreams Deferred by Langston Hughes, which is about what happens when a dream is deferred. Does it dry out, but does it explode? Or does it and that's a really interesting thing to think about. I use that in a goal setting workshop with writing and it's sort of what happens to your dreams and they're different. They're powerful pieces that I like, there's Sojourner Truth, entire woman that she is set at some important point in history, which the Americans will know more for context, but I remember that had been quite powerful. You know, I can do this and that an entire woman in that so really powerful piece of writing as well. So yes, there are a few, a few of those are probably things by James Baldwin. If I can remember right now, but yeah, there's lots to explore and be touched and moved by and we find what connects us to something real. And that's, you know, follow that scent and see where that leads you.

Kat 10:13

Yeah, I'm really talking about Maya Angelou. She was one of my favorite authors. I read, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings as a kid. And it was just one of the most beautiful and devastating pieces of literature I've ever read. It's if anyone hasn't read it, I would definitely recommend going and reading it because it is really, really amazing. It's super. And another book that I think is one, like when you're talking

about how everyone has different ideas, or some of the most important contributions, one of my favorite black authors is actually Malorie Blackman because, again, I grew up reading her book, and if anyone's looking for a recommendation, Noughts and Crosses. It's an amazing book, where it's basically a sort of a race flipped wild where, like white people, or black people and black people or white people, and it's really, really interesting and highly recommend it. And so what made you decide to write a book about black British MPs? And again, for our American audience, and these are members of parliament, not anything else?

Shirley 11:15

Yes, and what I've just a few more black authors, British authors, I guess, because I was thinking American. But recently, we've had black and British by David Olusoga, which, again, is based on reality, you know, it's not, it's nonfiction, but it's looking at the story of black British people and that story over the generations. And yeah, there are, there are a few others. What black British MPs, this came from my experience as a careers advisor, and working with young people who felt that they saw black people portrayed on TV in the UK at least, and possibly internationally as sports stars or musicians or those, only those jobs and couldn't see other jobs that were desk jobs or engineers or jobs that were hidden. And when you try to interview someone and expand their horizons for who they could be, it was still coming back to this is what I see. And there is something about if you don't see it, you don't know it's possible. And so you go back to what you what you're aware of, and I follow politics off and on, but I was aware that quite a few, you know, high percentage of MPs, black MPs were elected in 2019, that the number was higher than normal. And I thought those kids, I mean, I've left careers, but still my heart is there. At some point. They wouldn't even know what they're saying. They're not reading the papers that tell you about politics. I mean, at the

moment, everybody knows too much about politics, and it's all very skewed and mad. Certainly at that point, it was still, you know, people are reading that bad music of their favorite stars, and, you know, following social media, and I thought it'd be nice to take that knowledge, that information, and package it in a way so that it's accessible for young people. So they have this little not this book, that's just enough of each MP, for them to know that there are black MPs in Parliament. They come from different backgrounds. They're black, African, they're black Caribbean, they're black mixed with British, and they're 22 of them. So it's not, you know, not it's a small number, but it's still more than they used to be. And you could pick this off the shelf in the school library, and sit one lunchtime and see that oh, you know, I it's possible for me to do that if I wanted to. But also these MPs, some of them were engineers, some of them are PR people, some of them weren't journalists, some of them will. So it gives you all these other career paths as well. You know, there's the I don't think there isn't, I think, is there an athlete, one of the women was a judo champion or something, you know. So there are there are a select range of athletes and other people as well. But it's mostly scientists, as a chemist as a cancer specialist. So all these different career paths that could lead you to an MP. So again, it's saying you don't have to study politics to becoming a member of parliament. And also, it could be a second third career. And also, it's more than what you think it's possible for you to be when you grow up when you're older.

Ruby 14:15

Yeah, that's really powerful, like giving kids the opportunity to really see what they're capable of. I really love that. For our next question, as a black author, what has your experience with writing and publishing been like?

Shirley 14:29

Ah, so I sidestep some of the challenges by Well, I attended some publishing workshops and how to get a publisher and how to get an agent and then just thought, Oh, this is too hard. This will take a year because I know no one I have not just graduated from a top university with a first class honors from Oxford, you know, publishers are seeking to give contracts to my second career, you know, so I thought this is going to be hard to get As an agent, and my ideas are so unique, and so one off, so one of the things you need to do is prove there's a demand for your product. But no one was looking for this black British MPs that before I wrote it, there was no, they wouldn't have found in any marketing group, whether people were looking for this, they weren't searching for it in Google, necessarily. So it was, but I've written it, and now people are interested in and people are getting copies and, and that's, that's great. But I thought there was a need, and I wanted to do it, even if nothing sold, I wanted it to be there as the first and only one of its type. And that felt like this is what I had to do. So instead of trying to spending a year trying to find an agent, and then trying to find a publisher, I thought I'd Self Publish. And that's what I've done. All three of my books really so. And that's because it's a part time thing is because I have the counseling as the front and forward and but this, I can show someone I can complete, I can write, I can finish it, I can do the research I can deliver. And if and when there's another idea perhaps now with three books, I may try to put it somewhere. But so far, it's been avoiding all the pain I've never been rejected because I'm not jaded.

Ray 16:17

I agree, though, I think doing something for yourself writing for something for yourself is always more important than what other people are gonna think of it. So I really liked that perspective. I appreciate it. But on top of that question, we would like to ask how do

you think the writing community as a whole can be better at supporting these black authors?

Shirley 16:37

I think things like this is quite useful, you know, this sort of podcast. And I think there are few other podcasts and book clubs and black girls writing communities of See I've seen a few online. And I've not joined, you know, too busy, but I know that they exist. And I think also sort of perhaps there could be more mentoring from some of the established publishers, but I certainly know they're doing more Q and A's and they're doing more sort of pop up to this webinar will tell you all about the process. So often, you can find the first level of entry, you can find information around that. But who supports you on the way? Maybe it is peer support as required. So and I see quite a bit of that happening at the moment. So it's encouraging, I think, but again, I'm not trying to get my first novel published that may require some extra input from some someone who is connected.

Kat 17:28

In your own opinion, what do you think are some of the most common slash harmful stereotype types about that people found in writing? And how can writers avoid harming people and creating these using these stereotypes?

Shirley 17:42

I I struggle with that I find it quite difficult, I guess. Yeah. I mean, none of us are one dimensional. So I don't know what stereotypes I barely I. Yes. I mean, like, sometimes I don't finish things if they annoy me. So you know, I I think if you pick up a book and it's, you know, you don't agree, or you think it's not what you want it to be, then you can always put it down. But I think we're not one dimensional. And I think sometimes you have to create a black character that is not

stereotypical, but yet relatable. So there's all these challenges about who you know, how you create a precedent and people critique other people's work. None of us think our characters. I mean, if I had a character, that stereotypical we all think that's unique, and sometimes real life is so weird, that people who you think somebody's true. So I don't Yeah, I don't I mean, it happens I but I don't have a list of what they are, because I ignore things that I'm not interested in are annoying me, so I didn't kind of take it in. Because I think all that affects your creative process when you're taking in and you're trying to respond to and projecting what others might think about, oh, and it's just, you know, I'm a therapist I meet I help you and support you, and then we partner and create new ideas, this whole kind of other people's thoughts in your head, just kind of protect that I say,

Kat 19:06

Yeah, I think I think that is a good piece of advice, I would just make them three dimensional. I mean, that's, I think that's the only real thing that any one of us can do. Because as someone who is also a person of color, I also think that like the main thing is just making sure that that they're just a person instead of like, a sort of plot device or something because that's that's what when it gets annoying when you're like okay, so you just had this character in for like one throwaway like joke about their race. that's I think as long as you make them into a person

Shirley 19:37

Yeah. And and the idea is always right from what you know, isn't it right from the right the stories you want to tell? Right the stories you feel have been missing or not been told yet rather than what you just what you think myself but you know, that's me, someone else might just want to make a lot of money. So

Ruby 19:55

um, and that's really very good recommendation. And just like have to put down things that are just full of stereotypes because I think it's good to not like support books that don't you portray black people and then uplifting way. Yeah, for our next question. Well, obviously beyond your book on British MPs and your book on nicknames, where do you think that people can learn about black history?

Shirley 20:19

Oh, wow. Well, there's so many good books coming in at the moment, I think there's one exact the David Olusoga book I mentioned, which I don't have to have or might do is called Black and British, which talks a lot about the black British side of it. And in some ways, it's about oh and I've got Miranda Kaufmann, who's on black toodles, which, again, is not when you do the tutors at school here, they don't tell you that there were black people around in Tudor times, and Tudor England. So she's a white person, but it's rich, she's writing on black history. And she's an academic who lectures on that. And again, Black history is global. So you have a UK version, you have American, American, you have Caribbean history that involves black people taking over as from Africa and enslaved, and you have Latin American black culture as well. So it's so there's, I mean, choose a part of the world and expedient to explore it, because I think it's impossible to say you have a grasp of black history. And I think that's where people fall down when they think they know it. So almost realizing whenever you let at school is just if you learn anything, it's a tiny bit. And there's a lot more to learn. And then it's global. So you know, decide where you're going to start rather than, you know, I know where you come from. And I think you are that ignorance is the worst. You know, the worst thing here is just to know that you don't know, and begin to self educate.

Ray 21:46

Yes, as a product of the American public education system, I can relate to that. But piggybacking off of our previous stereotyping question, there's a lot of writers out there who know that representation of black people is really important. But a lot of us are a little bit hesitant to portray these people, because we feel like it's very easy to get it wrong or portrayed in a negative way. So how, what is your advice to writers who want to accurately portray these black people in their own writing?

Shirley 22:15

I mean, I think it's a tough job. Because I think if you're, if you got I mean, you know, this is got so many political things, and I don't want to get into trouble with any and, you know, I didn't discuss writing that this sort of world, really, I just write what I want. So it's quite hard to but I've heard discussions about you know, especially if people represented somebody who's not from their cultural group, their race, whether they're getting it right whether stereotyping, but it's possible to stereotype within your own race as well. So it's, I think anyone can do it. And it's, it's probably still about the character being feeling real and authentic and relatable. And like a whole three dimensional person is probably just sticking to that and doing it with a genuine good hearted, not wanting to take a box and wanting to because characters also need to be flawed, then they can't be perfect, because you want every black person to be this role model. You know, that's why I'm doing the role models on here. And even they have their issues that I ignored, some of them I did not include. So it doesn't have to change it just not included it which is which is a different thing. But you can't Yes, you can't create perfect characters, because we're all human. And we're all we're all flawed. So it's a tricky thing to balance your flawed mess across all the races in your Any way you look at it, it's just complicated. But it's just our modern times. And at least now we're having these discussions, and still the best books will rise and the best

books will draw in the crowds. And not everyone can like every book. So I think, you know, it's just being open to some people will criticize. But actually, if you tell him a story you want to tell and you're happy with it. Then you'll begin to have to have a fan base and they'll come back for the next installment. So it's maybe it's about conviction and going with what you feel is right for you and the story you want to tell.

Kat 24:12

We've kind of already discussed this lightly. But do you have any general recommendations for non fiction resources? I know you already mentioned a book about black Tudors which is amazing by the way, it's so interesting because you especially because when you grew up you sort of think it especially with like, certain shows and stuff when like TV shows on like BBC decide to have sort of black characters in like Tudor based shows, and everyone goes, Ah, that's so unrealistic. And then you read a book like that you're like, oh, it's really interesting. So I definitely recommend people looking into the history of like black Tudors and stuff because I remember I love that I was like, mind blown. I did not.

Shirley 24:49

Yes, he was in the court of Henry the whatever and something else and something else he like real people with real drawings and pictures of them. It's just Yeah, and because of I contacted Miranda Kaufmann and asked her to give me a quote for my book and she grieves that was I was jumping up and down that day because I've never met her, I love you. And she did. As well as David there are other there is a new book actually, that's just come out that I've got that's called Black joy, which is stories again, it's people's stories of their experience, writers etc is published by Penguin. And I've only just started to look at it but it looks like it's got good stories. These are modern stories which are

telling more of so that's nonfiction and then Bernadine Evaristo, a girl woman other which one, the joint Booker Prize is fictional characters, but again, a broad range of them that includes every sort of different type of black female that there could be. So that's another way to get every you know, each one a unique story, but you're telling a different aspect of womanhood and girls, etc. So those are some great writers. There are many more, there's Brit(ish) with Afua Hirsch, which I have not finished. But that started off well. It's British on race, identity and belonging. So that's another another good book that it's she is often asked to go on television shows to debate someone who's saying the exact opposite to her. And she's then has to kind of be very strong to express her opinions. So it's that she's very, very clever.

Ruby 26:30

Yeah, those are all really great resources. Thank you. So our next question was submitted by our assistant producer, Jazmin. And I wanted to ask, are you familiar with the enemies to lovers trope in romance books, where like, they start out as enemies and progress into like dating, basically. And this has become a bit of a controversial topic, just in that it's entertaining, but like, is it healthy? So we wanted to ask your opinion as a counselor on that sort of an idea of somebody going from like, absolutely hating each other to being in love over the progress of a book.

Shirley 27:10

That's intriguing. Well, often we hate someone, or jealous or someone or anything, because they, they trigger something within us. So it's often that similar to us, or something, or they're, they carry something that we want. So there's a jealousy there, or they show up some part of us that we so either way, there's a deep connection, because hate is a strong passion as well. It's not someone that we can just ignore. It's not that it touches at all, they do move us that in one way. So it of

course, it can progress to the, you know, opposite of hate to over a very long book, I suppose. And all the misunderstandings kind of, you know, whatever the case is you because of this, but now I see that because I like that as well. I've always wanted this. So, you know, so there'll be I guess reasons I think it falls away and love is revealed. Yeah. It could happen, I guess.

Ray 28:13

Yeah, it's a very, very complicated trip to write, believe me. But for the next question, how do you think discussions like the one we're having right now, about specifically black people's experiences might affect young people's motivation to write their own story?

Shirley 28:30

Well, I'm all for people writing their own stories. And I think it depends on if you need an audience that has story you're not. So we could all blog now for free, we could all in some of my writing workshops, I get people to write aspects of their story. And that is something you can keep for yourself, you can do something for your family, it doesn't have to be published out there. So the idea of people pay to read your story. That's another that's a different thing, almost because then there's a marketplace. And then it's delivering what the marketplace ones but that we can all write our story is something I'm passionate about and which is why I do my writing workshops, which I haven't got any plan, but hopefully there'll be some later in the year. And it's how we can write from aspects of who we are, whether that's childhood or our first job or our first holiday or what it's like to live in our skins so you know how we feel going to a new country. There are many different ways depending on the themes, and I've done a few and wants to do a few more that we can all write from because we're living we are living story. We're life in action.

Kat 29:36

I think that is our last question. So Shirley, do you have anything last things you want to say to our audience before we begin wrapping up?

Shirley 29:45

Well, I think keep keep your love of words. Keep writing. Keep listening to your inner voice. Listen to yourself and know that what you think and feel matter and you can record that just simple journaling is useful for Mental health as well. It's just good to work through what's going on and to help you reflect on your life and Yeah, sort of a place a safe place to put your thoughts and feelings as well. So whether it becomes fictional it just stays in a journal. Just keep keep writing and see what comes be open to what's possible.

Kat 30:24

Thank you so much, Shirley, this has been an amazing amazing podcast interview and we are really grateful for you agreeing to come on and the insight you've given us. That was amazing.

Ruby 30:34

Yes, thank you. And just before we go is there anything you want to plug, like where people can find you, maybe where people can find your books?

Shirley 30:34

So my books are on Amazon, and it's Shirley Anstis, that's A-N-S-T-I-S, that might be in the surenotes, I presume. But Black British Members of Parliament in the House of Commons is the latest book. You can find me @shirleyanstis on Instagram and Twitter, and that will probably be the easiest places, I do have a blog as well, but it's, yeah, Living Being Doing, if you would like to see that as well. It's not very up to date but it's good.

Ray 31:17

Well, thank you again, this was wonderful, I feel like I've learned a lot. Very happy about that. But until next time writing cadets, and we'll see you on our next adventure.

Credits

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