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Small Island

on MASTERPIECE Classic

Hosted By Laura Linney

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Interview with *Small Island* author ANDREA LEVY

Andrea Levy came relatively late to fiction, starting her first novel in her thirties as an experiment to see if she could tell the largely unknown story of the black immigrant's life in Britain. She succeeded—spectacularly so with her fourth novel, *Small Island*, published in 2004 and winner of the prestigious Orange and Whitbread prizes for fiction, among other honors.

The Whitbread jury said it best: “What could have been a didactic or preachy prospect turns out to be hilarious, moving, humane, and eye popping. It's hard to think of anybody not enjoying it.” Levy recently answered questions about MASTERPIECE Classic's beautifully-rendered adaptation of *Small Island* from her home in north London, where she was preparing for a book tour for her just-published fifth novel, *The Long Song*.

In *Small Island* Gilbert Joseph arrives in England from Jamaica on the *Empire Windrush*. What's the significance of that particular ship?

That particular ship is credited with being the beginnings of multi-cultural Britain, although there were black people in Britain before that. What happened was that 492 men from British colonies in the Caribbean bought passage on the *Empire Windrush* to come over here to live and work. The ship caused an enormous stir on its way across the Atlantic. The colonial office said, “What are we going to do with all these men? Where are we going to put them? They won't stand a winter!” Obviously, there were many people coming and going into Britain at this time, but these were black men coming from a place that had once been a slave colony. This has become an iconic event, and there are calls for a Windrush Day, rather like you have a Martin Luther King Day, where we would celebrate the change that started to happen because of that ship.

Why did the wave of immigration start then?

That's what I look at in *Small Island*. During the Second World War about 6,000 West Indian men volunteered for the RAF. They left those Caribbean islands for

the first time and came to Britain and Europe and saw a different life. After the war they wanted the opportunity that they saw over here. At the same time the old slave colonies like Jamaica were suffering from a decline. So put those things together and you have this mass immigration.

About ten years after the *Windrush*, Britain actually asked people from the Caribbean to come to England, because they needed people to work in the health service, on the busses and tubes, and in places like that. So there was a period of time where British authorities were actively trying to get people from the colonies to come.

Your father was on the *Empire Windrush*. Was he proud of being a part of history?

Sadly, my dad died before he could get that pride. I only found out about him being on the *Windrush* by accident. We were watching something on the telly and he said, "I was on that ship." But he never talked about it. And now I regret that he didn't live to see himself go down in history. That would have been nice.

Gilbert is just one of the narrators in the novel, which also includes the points of view of Hortense, Queenie, and Bernard. Why did you decide to use four narrators?

I started the book in the third person, thinking I needed an omniscient narrator who can see everything. But that wasn't working; it felt like I was writing behind a sheet of glass. So I decided to try the first person. Since I needed to go to lots of places, I came up with the idea of using four first-person narrators. Then I thought, "You can't write a book with four narrators!" But Matthew Kneale had already written a novel, *English Passengers*, that had around twenty narrators, so four didn't seem like very many at all. From there, it was a process of getting into character with each of the different voices. I had to think myself into their different world views. It was incredibly stimulating and quite liberating.

Let's go through each of the major characters, starting with Hortense. It's her dream to leave Jamaica for Britain that helps drive the plot. Would you say she's a strong person, yet she hides a certain vulnerability?

Yes, she's quite insecure underneath. Everything is a show. Her actual character is much more frightened by life than she would like to have you believe.

Why does she have an oddly elevated way of speaking?

Educated Jamaicans from my parents' generation spoke in a way that was vaguely nineteenth century. It was terribly proper. Sometimes it would be odd. My mom once wrote me a card saying, "The birds were prolific on the beach." Not quite right, but very proper.

Tell me about your approach to Gilbert.

He hasn't got such airs and graces when he talks. He's a very decent man. Through him I tried to capture that typical West Indian dry sense of humor. He came out of my research into the West Indian service men who came over during the Second World War. Actually, I fell in love with Gilbert as I was writing him.

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He's an interesting contrast to Michael Roberts, the mystery man who breaks so many hearts.

Yes, Gilbert is a thoroughly decent chap, whereas Michael is not quite so. Michael wants the ladies, as they say. He's a good-looking Jamaican man who is enjoying himself. I'm sure he's now sitting on some veranda sipping rum punch and thinking about his glory days.

Since you didn't grow up in Jamaica, did you have to develop an ear for how Gilbert would have spoken?

It's amazing because I never realized I had developed that ear until I started writing. I remember doing a reading and my mom was in the audience. I was doing it in a Jamaican accent, which I managed to do—I can slip in and out of it. At the end, my mom said to me, [Jamaican accent] "How you learn to speak like that?" And I said, "From you." And she said, "I don't speak like that!" I realized how much I had imbibed, as you do when you're the child of immigrants.

Hortense and Gilbert have an endearing, naïve love for England and all things English. Yet Jamaica was a colony that was brutally exploited for centuries. How does an attitude like that arise, where it seems it could easily go the other way, into hatred and resentment?

It's complex, isn't it? I would have to say I don't know. To be fair, there are a hell of a lot of people who don't have that attitude towards England. But there were also a lot who really believed that everything English, everything British, was the finest and the best. One of the things I put in the book was the experience my mom had, which was that when she came to England she was surprised to see white people who spoke roughly; who were cockneys; and who were sweeping the road. Because in Jamaica, if you were a white person you spoke well and you didn't work; you just sat around.

Queenie is a Yorkshire farm girl who comes to the big city. Tell us about her.

Queenie is a warmhearted person, a kind person, an open person. With all my characters, I never want them to be perfect; they have faults, just like us all. So Queenie isn't perfect. She's a real, rounded person. If you look at Hortense and Queenie, their backgrounds are very similar. But they never really get to know that because of the gulf between them, because one was born in Jamaica and one was born in England; one is black and one is white.

Given Queenie's upbringing, how did she get to be so open-minded?

Some people are just born like that, aren't they? They don't like their surroundings or the morality or ideas that their parents had, so they fight against it.

Bernard, who Queenie marries, has a number of distasteful qualities. Do you consider him the villain of the book?

I don't do villains. Well, I try not to anyway. I just wanted a man who had grown up in England in the thirties and forties and been led to believe that being a white Englishman was the highest achievement you could attain. Because of the Second World War and because of what was happening in his house when he came home, his world view is being shaken. It's completely understandable to me why somebody like Bernard was trying to cling onto what he believed to have been the best before.

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Were there a lot of men like Bernard in England when you were growing up?

Certainly. I knew them. They weren't brutes; they weren't bad; they weren't nasty. They were just going through this change which was turning them into angry, frightened men.

Growing up in the sixties, were you aware of the civil rights movement happening in U.S.?

Yes, absolutely. But in Britain there was no segregation or anything like that, so there was a sense that we didn't do it quite the same as you did in the States. It was a slightly different relationship. Historically the slaves didn't live amongst the British; they were in the Caribbean. So what happened in 1948, when my parents came to Britain along with many other descendants of slaves, is that a lot of people here didn't know why they were coming and what relationship the Caribbean had to Britain. That was our struggle—to try and educate people what our history had been.

I take it the “small island” of the title refers to both Jamaica and Britain.

It does, yes. It's a funny thing about titles. If people knew how writers came up with titles, they wouldn't dwell on them quite so much.

So how do writers come up with titles?

I don't know how other writers come up with titles, but this one came about because I didn't have a title and realized that it must be hidden in the book somewhere. All I had to do was find it. It occurred to me that Gilbert was always talking about “these small islanders”—meaning people from the small islands around Jamaica, but later he realizes that Jamaica, too, is a small island. And of course the reader can say, “Oh, yes, it also means Britain.” But how I actually came up with the title was by playing hide and seek in the book. I knew it was in there somewhere.

For all of its volatile subject matter, *Small Island* has quite a lot of humor. Is this lightness of touch that you bring to serious material part of your outlook?

Small Island for me is an extremely serious book, but humor is absolutely part of it. I don't see how you get through a day without having humor around you somewhere. I can safely say that today I've laughed many times at stupid things, and it's not because I haven't had a serious day.

Is it odd for you to see actors assume the roles of characters that you have envisioned so vividly?

I love that bit, because the cast does a fantastic job. They really do embody those characters. I cannot now think of the characters in *Small Island* without seeing the actors.

Did they shed any new light on the characters?

The actors ask you all sorts of questions about the characters. The first thing that they asked me was, “What happens after the book ends?” which threw me into meltdown, because I don't know.

The difference between writing a script and writing a novel, I imagine, is that in order to write a script you have to know the characters inside out; you have to really understand them from the beginning, which is why the actors were asking those questions. But when you're writing a novel you get to know the characters as you go along. It's a much more fluid process. I hope I'm not doing scriptwriters a disservice, but that's the way it seems to me.

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Some writers say that their characters assume a life of their own and sometimes do surprising things.

Does this happen to you?

I always thought that sounded a bit pretentious. But I have said it myself, so I've become pretentious. But it's honestly true. That's what's so wonderful about writing novels.

***Small Island* strikes me as the kind of big, ambitious multi-part story that is very difficult to bring off unless you're an experienced author. How did you decide that the time was ripe to try something on this scale?**

I'd written three books before and they were much more semi-autobiographical, drawing on my own experiences. But I was OK going along like that. Then I judged the Orange Prize for fiction and had to read seventy books back-to-back—books that I wouldn't normally read, including fantastic writers like Margaret Atwood, Ann Michaels, and Annie Proulx. It was like an epiphany. I thought, "I see! You can take on the world. You can be ambitious." I really wanted to try something ambitious to see whether I could do it. What I had in mind was a story based loosely on my parents coming to this country and the people they came to live amongst. Since it would have to be set in 1948, I'd have to do a lot research, which I'd never done before. Once I got started, I absolutely loved it. So I'll probably never go back now.

Your latest novel, *The Long Song*, seems more ambitious still. Could you describe how it evolved?

Every book that I write is about me trying to understand my own heritage and understand the people that I came from. After I finished *Small Island*, I thought, "OK, now why were my parents in Jamaica?" As soon as you ask that question you hit slavery. My first thought was, "Oh no! I don't want to write a book about slavery. It's just too difficult." But the idea wouldn't go away. Then I was at a conference in London where the topic was the legacy of slavery. A young woman stood up and asked, "How can I be proud of my ancestry when they were all slaves?" My reaction was, "What's to be ashamed of?" But it's a good question. We need to have a lot of stories about slavery, because it was an institution that lasted 300 years. Three hundred years! Everybody thinks they know about slavery because there are a couple of dozen books about it. But there deserve to be many more, so I began mine.

What is *The Long Song* about?

It's a book about love, life, and family set in nineteenth-century Jamaica on a sugar plantation. It revolves around July, who's born a slave. As narrator, she is an old woman telling the story of her life.

Were you able to bring humor to it?

Do you think no one laughed for 300 years? People don't survive if their daily experience is, "Got up. Got whipped. Got hung from a tree." That cannot be every day. I wanted to get in contact with the life that the slaves lived, the life that they had to survive, the life that they thrived in.

Was *The Long Song* more difficult to research than *Small Island*?

Yes, slightly more difficult, because there's nobody to interview. So it's all from books. There's very little actual slave testimony, but there is an enormous amount written by white people who went to the Caribbean—planters and abolitionists, men and women—who wrote about what life was like. They would talk about the black people around them, and through this you could glimpse the life of slaves.

At least, I could, by reading between the lines. I could see something going on, and that's what I tried to capture in *The Long Song*. But it's a work of fiction, you know. It's me imagining it. Having to imagine it into reality is what we're going to have to do with that experience.

Are there any writers who inspired you to become a novelist?

Oh, lots! But one of the big things that made me realize how powerful writing could be was reading James Baldwin's short stories. There is one, "Going to Meet the Man," about a lynching that made me realize it's incredible what you can do, how you can show people things so clearly through storytelling.

It's funny because I didn't become a serious reader until after I got out of school. George Eliot is a case in point. I had to do *Middlemarch* for the A-Level exam. I don't think I read it; I just sort of skimmed it. As a young working-class black girl in London, I hadn't a clue what that book was about. It was only as I got older that I discovered what a fantastic piece of work it is.,

The first book to make a big impression on me was *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French. I used to think a book was something that you opened, and it bored you stiff. It was a form of torture. But then I read that book and I realized, "Crikey! Fiction can be entertaining!"

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Small Island is a Ruby Television Production in association with AL Films for the BBC, coproduced with WGBH Boston, and made on location in Northern Ireland with the assistance of Northern Ireland Screen (NIS). The director is John Alexander (*Sense & Sensibility*). It is adapted by Paula Milne (*Endgame*) and Sarah Williams (*Becoming Jane*) from the novel by Andrea Levy.

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For a limited time beginning April 26, 2010 *Small Island* will be available to view online at pbs.org/masterpiece.

Online press materials available at pressroom.wgbh.org and pbs.org/pressroom

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