



## Jesmyn Ward wins National Book Award

NEW YORK (AP) — Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, a surreal and poetic novel about a struggling family in Mississippi, on November 16 won the National Book Award for fiction.

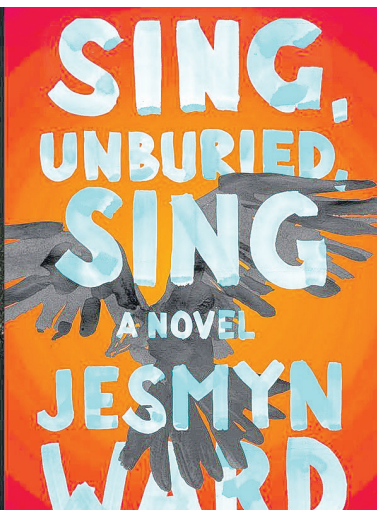
It was the second time Ward received the fiction prize: She won in 2011 for *Salvage the Bones*.

Masha Gessen's *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* received the non-fiction prize and Robin Benway's *Far from the Tree* won for young people's literature. The poetry prize was given to Frank Bidart for his career anthology *Half-light: Collected Poems 1965-2016*. Each of the four winners received \$10,000.

In a brief, emotional speech, Ward spoke of her frustration with some readers who wondered if they could connect with members of a poor black community in the South. She thanked the publishing community, and her friends and family, for their ongoing support.

"You looked at me and the people I love and write about ... and you saw yourself," she said, adding that she felt honoured to reimagine and amplify the voices of those she knows back home in Mississippi.

Themes of identity and displacement were common in this year's fiction finalists, from Elliot Ackerman's Middle East saga *Dark at the Crossing* to Min Jin Lee's novel of cultural conflict in Japan and Korea, *Pachinko*. Lisa Ko, whose *The Leavers* tells of a young adoptee's divide between



East and West, said that "America has always been obsessed with identity and self-definition".

"As someone whose family has been immigrating for generations, I'm drawn to stories of survival and a search for home and belonging, and I'm interested in how expectations of assimilation have intersected with culture and policy throughout US history, and at what cost, and to whom," she told *The Associated Press* in a recent e-mail. "These are evergreen themes in this country ... perhaps especially resonant right now as our current administration is running on an explicitly exclusionary platform."

The ceremony also took place during a wave of allegations of sexual harassment and assault, including against literary editor Leon Wieseltier. One of the night's featured speakers, former President Bill Clinton, has received increased scrutiny for past allegations of harassment and assault. Chris Hayes of *MSNBC* tweeted: "As gross and cynical and hypocritical as the right's 'what about Bill Clinton' stuff is, it's also true that Democrats and the centre left are overdue for a real reckoning with the allegations against him." A liberal columnist for *The New York Times*, Michelle Goldberg, wrote recently that it was time to "look clearly at the credible evidence" of sexual assault. Clinton has repeatedly denied the accusations.

The awards were presented by the non-profit National Book Foundation. Executive Director Lisa Lucas declined to comment on Clinton's attendance.

Many stood and cheered for the former president as he was introduced by the ceremony's host, Cynthia Nixon. Clinton was there to praise Scholastic CEO and Chairman Richard Robinson, winner of a Literarian prize for contributions to the book community. Clinton noted that he and Robinson had collaborated on projects for the Clinton Foundation and even managed a pointed

inside joke when he boasted that Robinson would send him early copies of "Harry Potter" books, a perk off-limits to the general public.

"That's one of the things the establishment gets that's so terrible," he joked.

Clinton, Bill or Hillary, would have won in a landslide over Donald Trump among the dinner gathering of authors and publishers at Cipriani Wall Street. And books themselves were held up as part of the resistance. Nixon called them a vital weapon in "an increasingly hostile world". Robinson cited literacy as a great equaliser, ideally available to the rich and the poor. "Equal education is the only solution to maintaining a democratic society," he said. Bidart said writing poetry has been how he "survived" over the past few months.

Gessen, the Russian-born author and journalist, observed ruefully she never imagined a book about her native country would win a prominent American prize.

"But, of course, times have changed," she said.

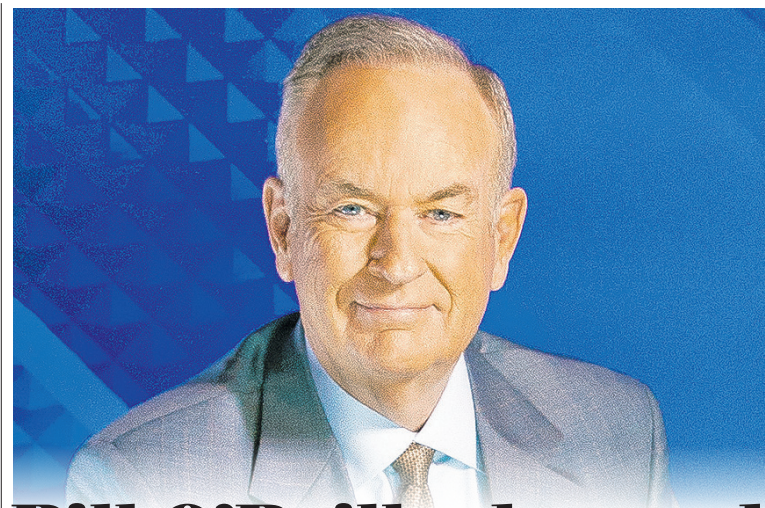
Oscar winner Anne Hathaway presented a lifetime achievement medal to Annie Proulx and performed an act of anti-name dropping, confiding that she and the author had never met. Hathaway starred in the film adaptation of Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*, playing a character who barely existed in the original story. Hathaway called Proulx an "epic, singular talent" whose fictional creations were vivid to Hathaway, like people she had met.

Proulx was grateful for her award and dire about the times, which she called "Kafkaesque". She lamented tribal politics, "flickering threats of nuclear war", environmental destruction and a shift to what she called "viral direct democracy, cascading over us in a garbage-laden tsunami of raw data".

Still, she noted the longing for old notions of truth and community.

"The happy ending beckons and we keep on hoping for it," she said.

## Author News



### Bill O'Reilly dropped by literary agency

NEW YORK (AP) — Bill O'Reilly has been dropped by his literary agency.

"We no longer represent Bill O'Reilly for future deals," William Morris Entertainment announced last month. "It is our fiduciary responsibility to service the existing deals we have under contract, but we will not be working with him moving forward."

O'Reilly spokesman Mark Fabiani said there was no comment "at the moment". O'Reilly's publisher, Henry Holt & Company, did not immediately respond to requests for comment. O'Reilly is under a multi-book contract with publisher Holt, including for at least one more "Killing" book. In May, Holt president and publisher Stephen Rubin told *The Associated Press* that he was "totally committed to Bill, long-term".

"We have created the most successful adult non-fiction

franchise in recent publishing history and we are thrilled to continue it," Rubin said at the time.

According to Holt, more than 17 million copies of O'Reilly's "Killing" series are in print. The historical books, co-written by Martin Dugard, include *Killing Kennedy* and *Killing Lincoln*. The most recent book, *Killing England*, was published in September and quickly topped the non-fiction best-seller list of *The New York Times*, although sales have been lower than with his previous works. *Killing England* was the first O'Reilly book to come out since he was forced out of *Fox* in April amid numerous allegations of sexual harassment.

More recently, *The New York Times* reported that O'Reilly paid \$32 million to a *Fox* legal analyst to settle a harassment claim. The conservative commentator has denied any wrongdoing, telling the AP in May that he was the victim of false and ideologically driven attacks.

### Briefly Noted From The Region

- Margarita Engle was named the 2017-2019 USA Young People's Poet Laureate by the United States' National Poetry Foundation.
- Ibi Zoboi's debut young adult novel, *American Street*, is on the shortlist for the National Book Award (USA) for Young People's Literature.
- Kheryn Casey's debut middle grade novel, *Hurricane Child*, is due from Scholastic, April 2018. An excerpt from the in-progress manuscript appeared in *Anansem*'s May 2012 issue.
- Aisha Spencer's essay, 'Breaking the Mirror: Reshaping perceptions of national progress through the representation of

marginalised cultural realities in Caribbean children's stories', was published in the 2017 edition of *The Routledge Companion to International Children's Literature*.

- Tracey Baptiste's middle grade sequel, *Rise of the Jumbies*, received starred reviews from *Kirkus Reviews* and *School Library Journal*.
- Emma Otheguy's debut picturebook, *Martí's Song for Freedom/Martí y sus versos por la libertad*, received starred reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publisher's Weekly* and *Booklist*. Her debut middle grade novel, *Silver Meadows Summer*, is due from Knopf Books for Young Readers in 2019.

### Bookends Credits

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# Review: Powerful Storytelling on Display in Mesmerising Collection

**T**he stories in *Love's Promise*, Jamaican Opal Palmer Adisa's new short story collection, are a blend of the ordinary with the juicy exotic, playfulness with generations of resourcefulness, comfort with the bizarre, the historical with the futuristic.

No stranger to storytelling, Dr Adisa reminds readers of her literary prowess by binding together tales that are ripe with emotional depth, synchronised chaos, youthful charm, and ancestral wisdom. The book's universal appeal doesn't upstage its Caribbean magic, but sweetens the deal for readers fortunate enough to tap into worlds continuously and gracefully overlapping each other.

Rooted in cultural pride and a love for language, *Love's Promise* has the rare ability to foster a relatable hometown warmth with exceptional flavour that engages readers from all walks of life. Caribbean characters who are beautifully, sometimes painfully, human. Characters who often don't allow external factors or adversity to determine the scope of their daily lives.

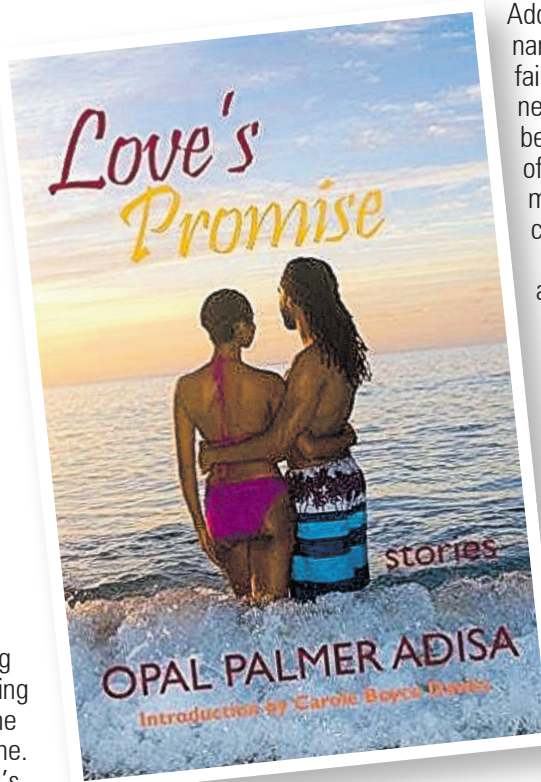
The collection starts with "Love Bush", a tale that conjures up memories of schoolgirl crushes during a time when, as an adolescent, everything hurt a little too much and bordered on being the end of the world. Dr Adisa's words fly off the page, offering a comforting glimpse at Caribbean wit, foods, dialogue, and customs through the eyes of a dreamy Jamaican child who evolves into a woman whose longing for an unattainable romance in her past eventually turns into a deeply gratifying appreciation of

her spouse.

Next, "Conscience is the Same as Do Right" is a multi-generational piece that speaks to inherited gifts, the unfathomable spirit world, karmic lessons, and how things always have a way of working themselves out. "Bus Stop", on the other hand, is filled with the innocence and spunk of adolescent companionship, a story that honours long-lost love coming full circle and asserting how dreams do come true, in their own time.

"Mattie and Night's Sister" weaves in the surreal nature of Caribbean folklore to show an outsider's struggles with internal oppression and her extraordinary journey to receiving acceptance from her community. Meanwhile, Dr Adisa focuses on the looming presence of sexual abuse in "Matrimony" and its longstanding, traumatic effects on women's psyches.

In *Love's Promise*, readers are reminded of the gift and curse of time in a familiar, yet original, tale of platonic friendship that blossoms into a solid, romantic love.



Additionally, the narrative shows how failure is sometimes necessary and can be a component of the pursuit and mastery of one's calling.

Dr Adisa addresses a wide range of major themes in "Mother Mushet", particularly mental health awareness. Here, she examines the terrifyingly close connection between the head and the heart, and the idea that one being

broken can inevitably break the other. The author calls attention to the unofficial caretakers of the sick, elderly, mentally challenged, and most vulnerable in a community, as well as the respect of, and tenderness towards, a population's treasure: the elderly. Other key themes include colonialism, unchecked wrath, grief, abandonment, the debilitating effect of familial hatred, internalised stigma (especially for women), and the power of dreams and premonitions.

"Soup Bones" is the classic tale of a

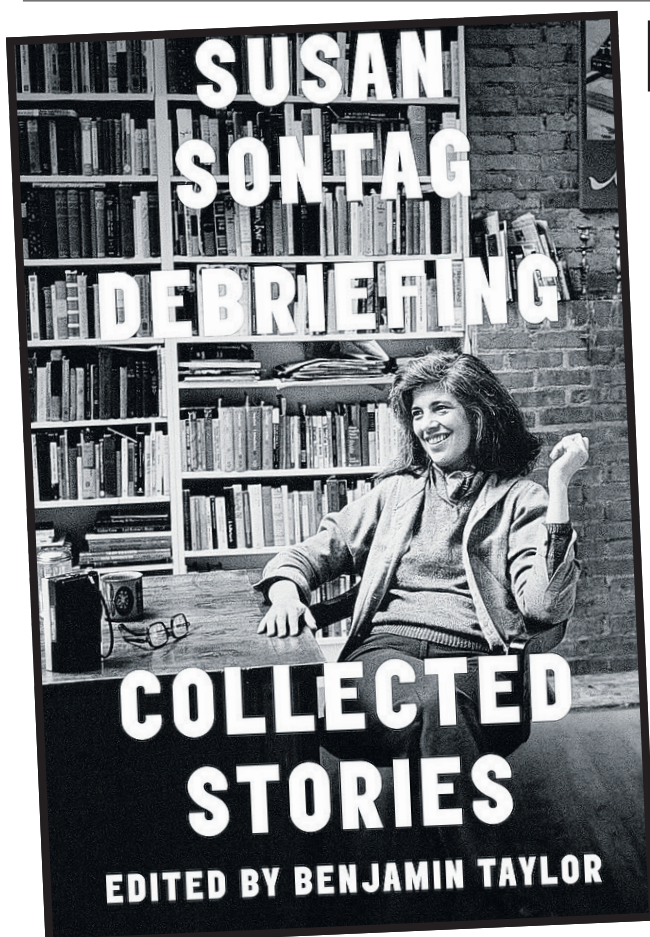
woman scorned, bringing forth topics on identity (or lack of), buried dreams, broken promises, infidelity, and merciless revenge. Similarly, "Trio" deals with betrayal but from a maternal standpoint, emphasising the female lineage and mothers' eternal desire for a better world for their children. The story's stinging transparency makes it a poignant piece, forcing readers to recognise both the light and darkness that live in the human heart. It brings up the long-term effects of sexual abuse, again, and shows devotion that's devastatingly overpowering. A raw and helpless passion, sometimes at the cost of everything. It's a hard, but honest, reminder that fate catches us up to us all.

"God's Child" is best described as dream-like and surreal with a beautiful fluidity, in terms of characters' actions and the story's concepts. Dr Adisa reminds women of the importance in making self-love and internal nurturing a top priority.

The concluding story, "The Living Roots", reads like a love song in praise of Black pride, the womb and maternal strength and human resiliency in the midst of oppression. Offering a close look at women as sacred healers and teachers of society, the story's also a call to action to honour tradition and the ancestors' voices, as well as their sacred survival tactics. The author weaves together fable-like and historical elements with futuristic and activist-oriented components, pointing out the dichotomy of the enslaved mindset versus mental liberty of the disenfranchised, and how, if we're not careful, we easily and willingly become slaves to a system we've claimed to overcome.

*Love's Promise* encourages change-makers — lovers, artists, dreamers, spiritualists, faith holders, culture keepers — who defy mainstream culture and expectations to forge ahead. Dr Adisa operates from a place of resilience in this mesmerising collection that displays the courage to love when everything else fails.

— Lyndsey Ellis



## Review: New collection of Susan Sontag's shorter fiction

*Debriefing: Collected Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), by Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag is best known for her essays, but she also wrote novels, a play and short stories. A new book out this fall, *Debriefing*, brings together all of her shorter fiction in an uneven, intermittently engaging collection. Eight of the 11 stories previously appeared in the 1978 volume, I, etcetera. The other three were first published in *The New Yorker*.

First, the highlights. The autobiographical "Pilgrimage" may be worth the price of the book alone for its earnest, nerdy account of Sontag's visit at age

14 — yes, 14 — to see her literary hero, Thomas Mann, who was then living in exile in Southern California.

Another gem, "The Way We Live Now", first appeared in 1986, at the height of the AIDS crisis. Stitched together from snippets of conversation among friends of a man recently diagnosed with HIV, the story perfectly captures their vain, often self-serving concern for him, as well as the anxiety and ignorance that surrounded the disease in that era.

"Baby" is a chilling, funny transcript of a years-long therapy session that borders on the surreal. We hear only the voices of the anxious parents, who desperately seek advice on how to raise their precious, precocious monster. It's a set-up that gives Sontag plenty of

room to lampoon the clichés of modern parenting.

"The Dummy" is another charmer, a prescient fable about an office worker whose humdrum existence has become so intolerable that he builds a robot to replace himself, only to have to build a second robot for the first robot when the first robot also finds his life intolerable.

The rest are a mixed bag. "Project for a Trip to China" is a sort of diary of everything Sontag has ever thought or felt about China, organised as a series of lists, anecdotes and aphorisms that, in the end, add up to nothing. "Unguided Tour," as the title suggests, is a free-form riff on travel assembled out of random memories, remembered conversations and the hackneyed language of tourist brochures.

These stories and others demonstrate an admirable willingness on Sontag's part to abandon conventional forms of narration in favour of a more fragmented, elliptical, experimental style. In doing so, she may well have anticipated trends in contemporary avant-garde fiction, but some readers may need more of a reason to grapple with this strange and often difficult work.





# 7 Questions for author Opal Palmer Adisa

BY LINDSEY ELLIS

Dr Opal Palmer Adisa has published over 20 works, both scholarly and creative, that centralise women, explore issues of gender, and the interstice of Caribbean and African Diaspora history. From her first book, *Bake-Face and other Guava Stories* (1986), she has tackled the issue of women's place in society; in particular, how women navigate patriarchal structures that restrict their sexual and physical mobility, leaving them vulnerable to abuse. Her poetry, stories, essays and articles have been collected in over 400 journals, anthologies and other publications. She has taught at Stanford University, University of California, Berkeley and University of the Virgin Islands. She was the Chair of the Diversity Studies programme at California College of the Arts from where she just resigned as a Distinguished Professor of Literature and Creative Writing. She has edited several journals including *The Caribbean Writer* at the University of the Virgin Islands, and is currently the founding editor of *Interviewing the Caribbean*.

Bookends writer Lindsey Ellis spoke to her about her latest book, a short story collection *Love's Promise* (2017), which examines the lives of 10 Jamaican working- and middle-class women touched by abuse. (See Ellis's review on Page 3.)

**Your work always seems to indulge all of the senses, regardless of the genre in which you choose to work. How did the stories in *Love's Promise* begin for you? Did you start with a particular character or a concept? An image? A feeling?**

Actually, a few of the stories were written and published before I thought about the collection. But one early evening, I was walking along the beach of St Croix, the US Virgin Islands, and I saw a middle-aged man and woman, at sunset, holding hands, getting ready to go for a swim. I snapped their photo and that was to have been the image for the book cover... I forgot that.

Anyway, seeing them, so connected and seemingly contented, I wondered what promise, what commitment did they make to each other, and in that moment the title came to me, *Love's Promise*.



Dr Opal Palmer Adisa

Then the idea possessed me; I couldn't shake it loose. I asked a few women friends what love's promise had they made to someone. I reflected on my own love promises, especially with regard to my children – and as a woman, I think that is the greatest and ultimate unconditional love one can have for another human being, and in my case, three persons.

My reflections led me down many roads, especially adolescent love, and the promises and the hopes of that age, and how I think many people are trapped in their adolescent fantasy of love. The considerations were all women-centred. They were feminist stories, like so much of my work; women were coming (inside my head) and talking to me about the various promises of love, for love, about love. I knew I wanted to explore some of the topics I had explored before and advance on others, such as domestic abuse, child abuse, women's personal power/magic, abandonment, crossing boundaries and self-determination. That was the genesis of the collection, and the stories presented themselves.

**I've read how you grew up surrounded by unofficial storytellers in Jamaica. Who were some influences that informed your life as a poet and writer?**

I have to say mostly my maternal ancestry; my great Aunt Zilla whose beautiful earth-toned

skin and face is etched in my memory and her voice like a reed, and the seamless way she told the stories to the entire village, for those two or so summer weeks, when my mother deposited my sister and I so we would 'know country life'; my paternal grandfather was also adept at weaving stories, and several people in the Cayman Estate village where I grew up, and the average Jamaican person who is full of stories. My storytelling is local and very Jamaican, and my mother in many ways, with all her multiple talents and her ability to dress people up or down, in a lady-like manner, all informed by poetic and writerly ear.

**How many projects have you worked on at one time?**

My head is very crowded so I always work on multiple projects at a time. When one collection is slow or stewing I move to the next. Sometimes though, my head is so full moving from one to the next slows down all the projects. I am usually working on three things simultaneously.

For example, for the last three years I have been working on three books yet to be completed: a prose poem collection about my father, entitled, *The Scent of My Father*; a collection of short stories about a 'mad' woman I encountered in St Croix, and whose life I began to investigate, entitled, *God's Child*; and also a book about Haiti, entitled *Still Standing*, which I began researching, well

two years, and which initially began as stories about women in the makeshift camps primarily around Port-au-Prince after the 2010 earthquake and has now expanded and morphed into what I am not sure... and recently, about seven months ago I began another collection entitled, *The Lies Men Tell Themselves*, as a result of a conversation with a 70-year-old male friend who was obviously self-appointed stupid about some affair he was having with a glamorous woman in her mid-thirties, and whom he naively thought loved him. Like duh! Really! Can we talk about male ego?

**How do you balance/prioritise your personal and professional life?**

Life is a balancing act. My personal mantra for the last 20 years has been to live large, and do it all. My personal life gets prioritised around my professional life. I cannot be other than who I am. Ideas spew from me. I write them, I dramatise them and act them out. Folks in my private life, like children and lovers, learn to hang if they want to continue enjoying my company.

**Do you have boundaries, in terms of these two worlds intersecting? Or, do you find the overlap necessary?**

Overlapping is necessary, and I would say vital. They feed each other. But I do have boundaries. I know when I need rest, and when I need to withdraw from folks and live in my head; and there are those times when I need to be out and about in the world, take the public bus, go to a little eating hold, hang low and listen and observe.

I am a vulture for stories, and also there is nothing more exciting than seeing someone and making up all kinds of things about that person because of the way they look or walk or some gesture they do, then running with it and turning it into a story. A writer has to live in the world, has to be open to the world, has to walk and search out the world, wander like a duppy.

**Is there a certain time of day that you prefer to write? Do you have a ritual before you sit down to write?**

I used to when I had children, a husband and was teaching full time and writing. Nights were, and I think, still are best for me,

except now when by 10:00 pm I am tired. So I am not getting much writing done, nor have I been as disciplined as I used to be and need to be.

I tell myself I am turning over a new leaf and will start to get up five days a week at 4:30 am and write for at least 90 minutes. I need to be more disciplined as there are so many stories vying for my time; in addition to the abovementioned projects, there are at least three novels, which are now fully developed, and I began my autobiography last year, and a collection of poems, entitled *return*, which is obviously about returning home after being away for so long...

**Many writers are often faced with the task of striking a balance between staying true to their core values, in terms of writing about what resonates with them most, and taking on the next big thing, or what's trending, in the publishing industry. What's your advice to emerging writers on how to confront and navigate this challenge?**

Many friends and relatives and some colleagues have told me over the years to use my ample skills to write what's trending; "Make some money, then write what you want," many have said. I have not gone that route. I have been told countless times — since so much of my adult life was spent in the USA — no one is interested in those stories you are writing about rural women and that aspect of Jamaican life, etc.

I think each of us has to find a balance. I have not made a lot of money from my writing, but I have made a fair amount. My writing has taken me places I had never imagined. My work has been taught and resonated with people in Europe, Asia, east, west and south Africa and Latin America, so that is evidence for me that staying true to core value has worked for me.

However, I will not presume to tell an emerging write to not jump on the bandwagon and ride it, but also stay true and make sure you write the stories you need to write. I don't think it has to be either or either. I took a hard-nose line, but I think this is an era for mixing up the game. Nonetheless, I do think each of us has a specific story to tell, and at all costs, we must tell that story.