



INTERVIEW

Words Teddy Jamieson
Photographs Paul Stuart



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THE AUTHOR ANDREA LEVY ON RACISM, REJECTION AND WRITING

Unlike the tiny council flat in Highbury which she grew up in with her parents, brother and two sisters, Andrea Levy's north London home, which she shares with her husband Bill, is full of books. Not quite as many books as the 50-year-old author has sold perhaps – that's in the region of 800,000 these days – but enough easily to fill wall space on three of the four walls that make up the room we are sitting in (and probably other walls that I don't see). A lot of books then.

Books did not play a big role in her childhood, it's fair to say. Back then – the late 1960s and early 1970s in a flat just a Thierry Henry volley, or a Frank McLintock daisycutter if we want to be chronologically accurate, from Arsenal's former ground – the only book that lived in the flat was some sort of medical dictionary, "a wonderful book of illnesses" as Levy recalls it with affection. "I remember that 1950s colour, gangrene and things like that," she says, something delicious in her memory detectable in her voice. But for the most part back then her life revolved around "telly, telly, telly" she says – Doctor Who, Coronation Street, the stuff of a typical 1970s childhood.

That has changed. And not just because books do furnish her rooms. On those book-cases – maybe on yours too – you could find novels, four of them in all, with Levy's name printed on the spine. On the cover of her latest,

Small Island, which explores the still relatively virgin territory of black Britain's post-war immigrant wave, her parents' generation, you will also see she has won both the Orange and the Whitbread literary prizes. Not bad for someone who didn't really start reading, never mind writing until she was in her twenties (actually the writing was still a decade away then) and who is still hardly brimming with assurance about her literary talents. "I was very unconfident as a writer when I started out and I've got a little more confident. I'm not very confident now," she says. What, even after winning all those awards? "No, every time you sit at a page it's just another page. I never think, 'You've done it before, it's a piece of p— this. Good heavens, no.'"

However confident (or otherwise) about her writing Levy may be, in her novels she has provided a mirror for that black British experience, beginning by drawing on her Highbury days and increasingly widening her gaze to explore a history that encompasses the experiences of her parents' generation and further back. What started as a personal obsession has grown to cover, she explains, "a slightly bigger canvas in that for me now it's about placing the African-Caribbean experience within British history and how we got here".

How she got here is a story that embraces slavery (her mother's mother's mother's mother was born a slave. She's not ashamed of that. "If you survived the middle passage you were tough and if you survived slavery you were clever. I'm immensely proud of that") and imperialism, which might help explain

suggestions that she has Scottish roots. She once wrote that her great-grandfather was "a man from Scotland who had flame-red hair". This afternoon she tells me this is only hearsay. "My genealogy has not been certified," she admits, "but yes ... there would be a lot of Scottish in a lot of Caribbean people. There were lots of Scots in the Caribbean."

Levy is an amused and engaging hostess, her mobile face always slipping towards a smile. When I get the names of her parents wrong (that's what you get for believing what you read in newspapers) she corrects me but won't put me right. Look it up, she tells me. I do. They were Winston and Amy. Winston came to Britain onboard the Empire Windrush in 1948. Levy didn't know this until one day she was watching a documentary about the voyage while her dad did the ironing. "He said, 'Oh, I came on that ship,' and that's how I found out. I just thought, 'At last, my dad's done something vaguely glamorous.' But since then I'm intensely proud that he was on that ship."

Winston Levy left Jamaica looking for better opportunities, she thinks now. "It's a difficult place to be and a difficult place to get on. I know my mum came because she desperately wanted to go to university and there was no university at that point in Jamaica. I think they felt that you would have more opportunities."

But as Winston and Amy discovered (a discovery also made by the characters Gilbert and Hortense who come to England in Small Island), while Jamaicans saw themselves as part of the empire and to all intents and ▶

Despite winning major awards for her novels, Andrea Levy still lacks confidence as a writer

INTERVIEW

purposes British, it was not a perception shared by the people they came to live alongside.

Were your parents shocked by the way they were received, I ask Levy. “Yeah,” she says. I think she’s too polite to say “what a stupid question”. “My first perception was that they were kind of in the middle classes in Jamaica and one of the shocks was to come and change class immediately and become not only working class but extremely poor.”

She’s keen to make the point about class. It is something she experienced herself later, when she left home to go to art college. “I was in Canterbury and I was completely at sea,” she says. “The biggest thing was not being black, the biggest one was being working class. Phew, blimey, I thought we were middle class until I went to art school. I thought having regular meals made you middle class. I didn’t realise how other people lived.”

Certainly money, or the lack of it, was a factor in her parents’ reception. Her mother had been a teacher in Jamaica but there were no such opportunities in England. There’s a scene in *Small Island* in which Hortense, like Levy’s mother a teacher, goes to apply for a teaching job in England but finds her qualifications are not recognised. It’s a scene drawn from life. When Hortense, in trying to leave the room, walks into a cupboard, Levy is drawing directly on her mother’s own experience.

Not allowed to teach, Amy Levy took up sewing. Winston worked for the Post Office. Money was tight. Inevitably, racism was part of the picture. This, after all, was an era when landlords could display a card in their window saying: “No blacks, no Irish.”

“All these things were a problem,” Levy says. “But I can’t say, ‘Oh yes, on Wednesday they regularly got beaten by the next-door neighbour,’ you know what I mean? It all comes in a rush. You can’t separate out these things. You’re not waking up every morning thinking, ‘Oh my god, another day in this hellhole.’ Some days were good, some days were bad.”

Returning to Jamaica wasn’t on the cards – they didn’t have the wherewithal to do so. “There were times when it did get rough and they thought, ‘I can’t get a break here, we maybe need to go back.’ But it was never an option. They were committed to making it work.”

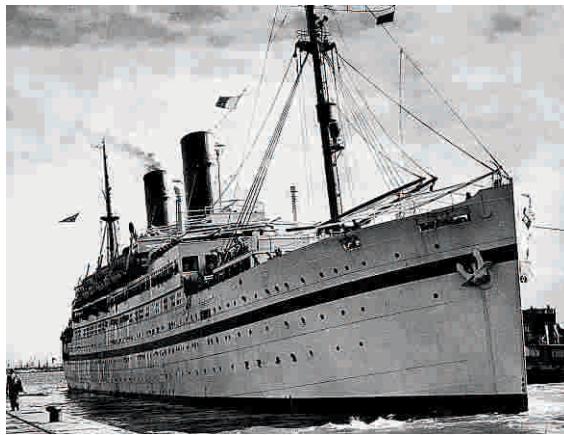
And they did. Levy’s mum, in between sewing and raising four children, went to teacher training college, got her teaching job and earned a degree via the Open University. “She worked full time, came home with bags of shopping. She’d make the dinner then she’d go and sit in the bedroom and lay her books out on the bed and study. She worked hard.”

You couldn’t really say the same about Levy herself. Or so she claims. When I ask her what sort of student she was she replies, “A lazy one.” And yet she got 10 O levels and two A levels. “I was lazy but I was quite bright.”

What she didn’t share with her mum was the same drive. “I was drifting along. I stayed on at school into sixth form by default. If I wasn’t going to be a teacher and I wasn’t going to be a nurse, which were the two respectable jobs you could do, then you could be a secretary and I refused to learn to type.”

She was, she says a difficult child. “I was quite a feisty little kid. I liked to get my way.” Her parents tended to give in. When she was four she came down with scarlet fever. “I nearly died. Because of that illness I was certainly perceived to have been given a lot more leeway than my brother and sisters were. And I was a sickly sort of child so my parents were nervous of making me anxious.”

Levy also had a different perspective on England to her parents. “I always understood



this society much better than my parents,” she says. “They gave up a little too easily in a way. I was a little bit more of a fighter, you know? They were, ‘Don’t worry – you don’t have to say this or do that, don’t make a fuss about this or that.’ I was more, ‘No, you can get this.’ A lot of the time I felt I was having to take care of my parents. I was having to show them the ropes. I probably wasn’t, but that’s what it felt like.”

Whatever the truth of it, the ropes were slippery. Levy was in a black hairdressers in Earl’s Court when she first heard the Conservative MP Enoch Powell’s infamous “rivers of blood” speech in 1968. “I remember something came on the radio and one of the women turned to the radio and said, ‘Oh just leave us alone.’”

She was very aware of the rise in outspoken racism in the early 1970s. “I was very nervous. You just had to watch yourself, just watch out. Mostly we got on fine, but it was precarious,” she recalls. “You would be going along fine with your friends and that and then somebody would notice that you ...” She trails off, the sentence unfinished but obvious. “There would be a flashpoint,” she continues, “then it would go away again. I had friends who could look me in the face and say something pretty nasty.”

But you stayed friends? “If I didn’t I would have no friends. You learned when to fight and you learned that if you’re going to fight you’re going to lose friends. I still do it today. I sit around a middle-class dinner table in a middle-class setting and there will be times when I will fight and there will be times when I won’t. Because that’s how you get on.”

When most immigrants come to a country they tend to cluster, to seek security or at least companionship in numbers. And yet on that council estate the Levys were the only black family. Why did her parents strike out alone? The answer is that while they were black they didn’t consider themselves to be all that black. “We were lighter skinned,” Levy says. Her

Clockwise from above: Levy with the Orange Prize for Fiction award for *Small Island* in 2005; the Empire Windrush, the ship that brought Levy’s parents Amy and Winston to Britain in 1948 along with many other Jamaicans in search of a better life; at the Whitbread Book Awards ceremony where *Small Island* was voted book of the year in 2005; and Enoch Powell, the MP whose 1968 “rivers of blood” speech fomented racism in Britain during Levy’s teenage years. The author dedicated her Whitbread prize to those who strived to ensure his prediction never came to pass

PHOTOGRAPHS: SERGIO DIONISIO/AP; PA; ALASTAIR GRANT/AP; PAUL HILL/REX

parents, she says, “had the sense of not being hoi polloi”.

“One of the shocks was that in this country it didn’t really seem to matter, whereas in Jamaica in the 1930s and 1940s it mattered intensely what your colour was. There was a real pigmentocracy.”

Her parents’ notion of being middle class is in a sense colour-coded, perhaps a by-product of that story of a Scottish great-grandfather, and certainly a by-product of the way imperialism worked in the Caribbean. “It’s a by-product of a terrible system, but the by-product is policed by the people who it is oppressing and that’s what makes it a difficult subject.”

Does she feel Jamaican herself? “I’ve got Jamaican heritage, absolutely. I’m sure I feel more Jamaican than you.” Well yes. I don’t think having a couple of Prince Buster records qualifies me, I admit.

“I have grown very, very fond of Jamaica, not that I want to live there or anything like that but in terms of learning about its history and what sort of place it is. I feel in a strange way quite sort of passionate about this place, that it’s been done down and that it’s owed.”

And yet Jamaica wasn’t held up as special when she was a child. “It was just a distant place.” Levy has only visited twice in her life, the first at the turn of the 1990s, just after her father died.

By then of course she had begun to find herself. Drifting into art college (Middlesex Poly, where she studied textiles) she also began to drift into politics. Her white friends pushed her to read African-American writers like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. “I was their black friend, so they would buy me these books and I would read them and I’d go, ‘Yeah, but I’d love to read something about Britain.’ I didn’t know about *The Lonely Londoners* [Samuel Selvon’s account of the Windrush generation]. Caryl



Phillips was writing then, I think. But there wasn't a great deal."

So she decided to do it herself. Well, that's a little glib. She didn't start writing until she was in her mid-thirties. She had been working in the wardrobe departments of the BBC and the Royal Opera House. "The idea of writing started as just doing an evening class in something and just see whether I could write." Her mum's insistence on proper grammar had rather put her off the idea when she was younger. "Oh gosh, yes. And at school. The whole emphasis was on proper writing."

As soon as she did begin – writing about her budgie and the gang of kids she hung around with in her childhood – it was, she says, like a floodgate opening. She had all these memories to draw on, experiences that nobody else was writing about – what it was to be black British.

Initially, there were a lot of rejection slips and when she did get into print her novels were met with polite indifference. "There's something about if you are writing about black people it somehow can't stand for a universality, that it has to be specific to that person and I think we've managed to put that to rest," she says. "You can have a black character who feels and thinks and can stand for Everyman."

That, in 21st-century Britain, seems appropriate. Andrea Levy is a black British writer. That is her subject and her story. It is also, Scottish great-grandparents or not, our story. We are all sons and daughters of the British empire, after all. ■

Andrea Levy is appearing at the Aye Write! festival, Glasgow on February 16 at 6pm. For tickets call 0871 230 9887 from Monday. Copies of Small Island are available free to readers of The Herald Magazine. For more details of the giveaway, funded by Heritage Lottery Fund and part of Aye Write! Bank of Scotland Book Festival, see page 12.

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