

Shade Podcast with Courttia Newland

📅 Wed, 2/17 11:06AM ⌚ 26:38

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, happen, steve, talk, started, write, person, experience, film, scholar, thinking, story, book, met, novelist, feel, dances, writing, lovers, called

SPEAKERS

Courttia Newland, Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast

-
-  Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 00:04

Hey, it's Lou Mensah here and welcome to the South London Gallery's Convergence Community Film Festival. You are listening to the second episode of the four part curated conversation series between Shade and Convergence, the platform for critical conversations, screenings and written submissions. And I'm delighted to say that today I'm in conversation with Courttia Newland. Courttia grew up in west London and published his first novel 'The Scholar: a West Side Story' age 23, earning critical praise for his portrayal of a teenager's life in the inner city. Since then, he has written seven more books and eight plays winning numerous awards for his work. In 2000, he co-edited the 'Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain' and as a screenwriter. He's recently collaborated with filmmaker Steve McQueen, on two acclaimed episodes of the BBC drama series, Small Axe, 'Lovers rock', and 'Red, White and Blue'. In 2021 Courttia has two new works of speculative fiction being published, 'A River Called Time' and 'Cosmogrammar'.
 -  Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 01:14

Well, hey, Courttia, and welcome to the South London Gallery's Film Festival. Thank you so much for joining us.
 -  Courttia Newland 01:22

Thank you, thank you for inviting me. And I'm really, really happy to be doing this, you

know.



Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 01:27

Well, we're here today to discuss the role that film can perhaps play in, you know, challenging racism in our everyday lives. So we're not talking about the protests. And we're not talking about all the political and social actions that can challenge racism, but how you know, when we're at home, just going about our daily business, how film can play a role in that. But I wanted to start off by understanding, like the process for you from maybe becoming a writer just like not your whole journey. But perhaps... When did you start the practice of noting down your experiences and your memories and your thoughts and getting them on to the page? And then how did that shift into a decision that that was going to be a career choice for you.



Courttia Newland 02:11

I mean, I started I've been doing it my whole life, I started very young, just just orally telling stories. From the time I could speak, I taught myself to read apparently, according to my mum. Well it's not really apparently they just picture me two or three years old in my reading. So yeah, I could read a very young age. And then I started trying to write as soon as possible, I was really lucky to be, you know, to grasp that quite quickly. And early on, you know, in my schooling, and, you know, I was taught by very, very, very good teacher. She used to read us Christina Rossetti poems.



Courttia Newland 02:43

When I was in, you know, I must have been about, like, you know, five, six years old, you know, she's reading Christina Rossetti poem. So, you know, like, I had a very, very good English teacher very, very early on. And you know, my mum was really into books. My dad was really into film. So I was really immersed in storytelling and language from an early age. I started trying to write my first novel when I was about 11, no, eight or nine, sorry. Yeah. And I finished it about when I was about 11. It never actually got finished. But I was trying to write for as long as I could work between the ages of eight and 11 gave it to my English teacher at my secondary school. I just started in first year, and she told me I was going to be a novelist when I got older, and I was really upset. Yeah, really, really, really upset. I lost it. Actually, I got really angry with her. Because I want to be an emcee. [Lou and Courttia laugh]



Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 03:41

That's being a storyteller and a novelist, but just in a short way.

C

Courtia Newland 03:44

Yeah, but I didn't really I wasn't, I was like what, are you crazy. That's just the like the least, like fun and cool thing you could ever say to me, you know what I mean, how dare you, and I was really upset and then, but then I continued to write stories and I think about that point in time. When I was heavily heavily into rhyming. I was also writing short stories. That's when I started writing my first black British short stories. And I feel like those were the precursor to The Scholar. I was trying to write in the way that we talked, I was trying to write about our lives. I was trying to do what hip hop was doing in the space. But then I didn't take it seriously. I really, really, really wanted to do music. And that led to me being about 18 or 19. And I was I was into drum and bass. I was into jungle.

L

Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 04:32

I think we're the same age, we were probably doing the same things at the same time.

C

Courtia Newland 04:37

Probably yeah. So I was putting out, I was putting out white labels with me and a couple of my boys. And we ran out of money. We pooled our money together various ways and you know, like dole and stuff. And then we run out of money. And so I decided I was going to write a book. And I was going to write a book, and I was going to put it out and I was going to get a film deal for it. And then I would stop writing. And I would go back to making music and I would never do it again. That was the plan. That was the actual plan that me and my boys sat down with, yeah, we're gonna do this. So we're gonna run it, you do that, and then we come back. And then we just buy studio equipment. And that book, I decided to write with The Scholar. And so that's how I, that's how I got started.

L

Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 05:21

That's an amazing story. And did you ever consider, like the role of storytelling, and the role that storytelling has in representation and challenging people's views? Or stereotypes? Or was it simply you were just in your world communicating your life, and you didn't consider that?

C

Courtia Newland 05:42

Yeah, I've never much cared about translating my experiences or our experiences, for

people outside. I've never much really been into that. I don't like the idea of that. I don't like what it does to the work, I find you become a translator, rather than a chronicler. And I didn't want to do that very much when it could be a chronicler.

C Courttia Newland 06:03

I didn't want to have to translate very much. I mean, we... with compromise, you know, like, there are degrees and balances. But I feel like very much I wanted to be immersed in the experience. It's what I didn't like about the art that I was seeing... 'It's too commercial man, you know, man that's too watered down, that's too, that's too...' Popcorn, that's what I used to call it back in the day, you know it's too sweet. I'd be like, okay, I wanted to write this. Basically, when I wrote 'The Scholar', I was like, I'm gonna write a book for the mandem.

C Courttia Newland 06:30

Do you know what I mean? I'm gonna write a book for everyone who understands what this experience is, and has been through, so they can relate, and they have the feeling. And if they don't feel it, I failed, so it has to be a road book, like proper.

L Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 06:44

Yeah, yeah. And I understand that. And sometimes our own experiences aren't always recognised by the outside world. And it's having that validation. That sometimes is what keeps us going. And, you know, every creative I've spoken to as mentioned that, and I just wrote a quote of an interview you did. And you were, you were saying that you'd felt hesitant before you were asked to write for the Small Axe series, you were hesitant about your novel 'A River Called Time', because you thought maybe no one was going to be interested in but then you did meet someone who was interested. And he said to you, you're at the top of your game, and I don't care that no one's recognised it. I see you and and that was Steve McQueen that said that, and I just wondered how that wants to sort of talk about that validation, and just how you met Steve, and how you made the decision sort of together about what your particular role was going to be in Small Axe?

C Courttia Newland 07:37

Well, I mean, just to start off with what what was said to me, that's me translating what he was doing. Steve's a.... much less verbal person than that. I mean, even in the films, you know, he doesn't like a lot of words, you know. But what he would say to me, he's very direct. And what he did say to me, and I know this verbatim what he said to me was

'You're special. There's nobody else like you.' He'd say to me, and he would just say that randomly when we were maybe talking about something else, and you just say, and I'd be like, rah, okay, hold on, because this is Steve McQueen saying that.

C Courttia Newland 08:11

And up until that point, to be honest with you, I'll be ...really it's a bit sad, a bit bigheaded and stuff. But I always felt I was, you know, I mean, I always felt like, I had something that... and that's not to say that I'm the only special that person out there. I think there's a tonne of tonnes of special talented people out there, and I love vibing with those people, when I see that I want to work with those people. I don't think I'm alone.

C Courttia Newland 08:32

In fact, you know, part of the reason why I wrote 'The Scholar' is because I was like, there's lots of people who have, you know, the ability to I have in the ends, you know what I mean, like, I'm not like the sole person who came out of that, that experience with this stuff to say, you know, and if you look at the people that came out of my area, and even people I went to school with, you know, I always talk about this, you know, I went to school with Noel Clarke, and I went to school with Chucky Venn, you know, like, I went to school with some some talented, talented people. So it's not like, I was the only one.

C Courttia Newland 09:02

But I think I think Steve saying that to me at a time when I had been like, you know, pushing against the industry with some luck in the beginning. And then it got quite hard for me, I was in that middle-ish area of being a novelist, you know, where all the attention falls away from you. I wasn't as young as I was, I wasn't as fresh as I was, in terms of like, being a newbie, you know, the spotlight had kind of faded away from me a bit. And I was still going, you know, I published like, many, many books like that, but at least three or four novels like that in that way and lots of plays, and I'm still writing screenplays. But you know, it wasn't it wasn't yielding any rewards. And especially after it wasn't really in any rewards compared to that what I felt was my talent, you know, like I had something to say that could be very prominent and could be very, you know, like, like, you know, I could take something very big, and I wasn't being given the opportunities to it allow me to say those things I felt.

C Courttia Newland 09:56

So when I met Steve, that was a time where that was happening. And to get his validation

was was like, like really amazing for me and a boost. And with 'A River Called Time.' You know, at that point in time, I think when I met Steve a really cool time, it's been like, I don't know, man like 16, 17 years that I'd been... since I began that book. And, you know, I had gotten to the stage where I stopped revisiting it as much as I had initially. So usually, every year or every two years, I look it over, I do a rewrite, I will add, and add, but by that stage, I've started to think to myself. Okay, go get used to the fact that this book might not ever get published. And that's okay, because it'd been like, nearly 20 years at that stage. Okay, get used to it, maybe do some other work?

L Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 10:44

Yeah, that's two decades. Do you know, I'm going to tell my daughter, that story of yours because she's started writing her first novel, she's 11. And when I said to her, oh, you know, how are you getting on with it? She's like, when I'm still in the research stage, she's like, 'I've got my whole lifetime, I can just, you know, do this until I'm an adult', and I'm like 'Okayyy...' But now you just saying that has made me think 'Okay, I'm gonna share that story with her' and say, that actually happened with you, you know.

C Courttia Newland 11:08

That's a good attitude to have, you know, it takes as long as it takes. Sometimes if it feels like that particular project isn't happening at that time, you can always put it down and come back to it. And if you talk to a lot of authors, actually, a lot of authors have had similar time periods for certain books. So I was watching an interview with Robert Jones, Jr, who, an African American author who wrote 'The Prophet', which is like an amazing novel. He said that took him 13 years, you know, so, okay. Yeah.

L Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 11:37

Yeah, exactly. And back to Small Axe again, and Lover's Rock. I was interested that it was the only fictional story in the series. But you know, for me, and I'm sure for so many, because we all saw the response to that film. You know, it actually felt like I was watching a documentary of you know, it was just like watching a fairy tale of our history. How specific was your brief in terms of the story that you were asked to tell?

C Courttia Newland 12:00

We, had, I don't think it was a conscious goal, I think, I think I mean, we did talk about what the blues parties meant to the community, we did talk about that a lot. And we talked a lot about our own experiences in the room, Steve was in the room. And it was

mainly at that point in time, it was Steve, and Alex Wheatle and myself, that really, really talked about what it was we remembered, and what we might want in a story like this. Steve had always had the idea. I mean, he talked about it, even before we were in the room, I've heard him talk about, you know, his aunt coming out of her bedroom window, being let out of the house by his uncle and stuff.

C Courttia Newland 12:38

And yeah, and it's thinking back in the early Sunday morning, and talking about that aspect of it and wanting to tell a story like that. And I think between the three of us sharing our experiences is we kind of devised a storyline. And it was about, you know, this young woman kind of loosely based on his aunt, you know, going out to a party like that. And, and, and, and having this experience and it all taking place in one night, you know, once we kind of put together the details of that, you know, what that night would encompass.

C Courttia Newland 13:13

You know, we talked a lot about ritual, you know, the things that happen in a dance, and I've been really interested in this kind of thing for a while now, obviously, Alex Wheatle documented it in his in his novels from from way back. So he's a brilliant, reliable source. And, and I also said to myself, wow, I have slightly because I was younger than Alex, I started to think to myself as a novelist, and as a short story writer, I have slightly different memories of the way the dances were, and I was trying to put those down, I'd written at least one or two short stories set around that period around blues dances, you know, and Town Hall dances as well, or community, you know, the community centre dances that used to happen, you know what I mean, I talked about that as well. And I'd written about it in prose.

C Courttia Newland 13:58

So I really, really, really wanted to get that down. And I really thought it was so important. And I think, you know, a lot of what happened in 'Lovers Rock' was unspoken, like, a lot of what we, you know, we wanted to do and what came out was just, it's very weird... came out of a real, you know, when I went off to co-write the script with Steve, came out of a real synergy between us that we... we didn't talk about a great a lot, you know.

C Courttia Newland 14:23

And like I said, Steve reinforced the ritual, you know, like, like the how..., like, talk about

break the night down. And when does this happen? When does that happen? How does it work? And then we would work on that together. And he'd say something, I'd say something and it went back and forth. I think it's interesting, you know, because there was a lot of talk about, you know, the authenticity of it and whether this happened or whether that happened, which I found quite... interesting, you know, because like number one thing is, is that all of us were there, right, me Steve and Alex were there right.

C Courttia Newland 14:54

We're talking about things that we saw with our own eyes, you can't really... Furthermore, the people that I then went to talk to you about their experiences, because even if I've had experienced it, it was the same with 'The Scholar', right? Even though I lived that life, I still interviewed my friends. You know, it wasn't like I sat down with a tape recorder or anything, but I just talked to them about stuff. What do you think should be in it? 'What about this...?' So someone say to me, yeah, you got put when we like run away from cabs after a race, you know what I mean 'Put that in'.

C Courttia Newland 15:27

So I was talking to my aunty. And I was talking to my mum, primarily, about their experiences, because obviously, this was from the perspective of a woman, you know, and I'd like more than three men with women sitting around the table talking about this. So I talk to women about their experiences, my mum went back and then talked to her girls about how it was when they all went to dances because she said, 'I want to get some more experiences'. And those are the things that are fed in. So there was absolutely nothing in 'Lovers Rock' didn't come from someone who'd been there said, like, Oh, you know, people say it's inauthentic. And none of that stuff happened. It's crazy, because there's so many different ways of having blues dances. So if you think about how many blues dances happened every weekend, for how many years up and down the country from London to Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, there's please. Cardiff, you know, I mean, like, how many blue dances must have happened? How can you have a definitive blues dance experience? You know, I find that really weird. So I'm just saying that just because, yeah, it's really funny, because everything came out of people who were there. Everything. So Dennis Bovell was there in the in the film, man.

L Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 16:41

I know, and this is the classic kind of response to art. And this is what every creative like, has to deal with... people who paint it with their own experience, and therefore I can't relate to that aspect... 'It's, it's not true'. Yeah, you'd kind of hope that people were more

developed than that. But sometimes that's just the way art, and you can't create you can't kind of manage what happens once it's released, can you?



Courtia Newland 17:05

You can't, and I found it. Like, I feel it's really interesting. I was actually quite happy about that response, you know, because it stirred something in people, you know, I mean, people felt very strongly about it. And I would prefer people to feel strongly about something I've done, then feel, you know, ambivalent towards it. But you know, it's quite funny as well, you know, when I was talking to Leroy, about 'Red, White, and Blue', he would say to me, 'All of that stuff happened, but not like that'. And he took it as a given. He was like, of course, it didn't happen exactly like that. Because you guys weren't there. You never saw it. Even some things that Leroy thought happened a certain way his sister Hyacinth would say, 'No, no, that didn't happen like that'. You know what I mean, because we all have different perspectives of like the way things happen. And I think that's something... Yeah, we're not quite used to we see our experiences so rarely on the screen that we when we do see, when it is screened, we expect things to be exactly the way that we imagined them in our heads. That doesn't even happen for writers.



Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 18:01

But you know that the thing that I came away with from reading the responses was how it did have that impact, like in everyone's... the processing was immense, like the amount of time it took to process afterwards, which means it tapped in to memories and feelings that perhaps none of us had gone back to or revisited until we saw your film.



Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 18:21

And I can't tell you how many creatives, activists, artists that I've interviewed, since their Lovers Rock came out and 'Red, White and Blue', all of the series. And we're talking about something completely different. But every single guest is brought up the Small Axe series in terms of its importance within the culture. Yeah, yeah, every single one. So it's so important. But I'm thinking about, you know, we're kind of lucky that this actually got done, you know, got created and part of that is because of the career path that Steve has had.



Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 18:53

And I read somewhere, it took 11 years for him to create or to... on the screens with a BBC and, and I'm just thinking if he didn't have his history, in his career, and the power that he

now holds within the industry, because of all the work he's done for such a long period of time, because of all the gatekeepers that we experience that, you know, along the road, trying to get work done, I just wondered what your particular experience of that has been at any point where people have just not let your story through or not let you through the door or you've processed something that happened and you thought, you know, there's some bias going on here. But you know, so I'm going to keep on keeping on anyway. Have you experienced that in your career?

C Courttia Newland 19:34

Completely. All the time. You know, it's so funny, because it didn't happen to me in the beginning of my career, you know, it didn't happen to me with *The Scholar*. And I feel like it didn't happen to me with *The Scholar*, because of the timing of when I'd written that story, which wasn't accidental. I'd seen *Yardie*, the book, come out and blow up. And there was an interesting Black British working class life that there'd never been before. So I stepped into that process, I stepped into what had been created in the wake of that book. And, and I managed to get myself a deal. And I'll always tipped my hat to Victor Headley for doing that. He made it possible for me to come out, you know, and I'll never forget, now utmost respect to him for that.

C Courttia Newland 20:18

And so it almost enabled our stories to be heard, you know, and some people wanted to hear those stories. Some people didn't want to hear those stories, but it gave me an opportunity. It was when I started moving into different fields, you know, when I started saying, Okay, now I want to do the same for someone else by writing science fiction. You know, that's when I found it difficult because I was being told, you know, in no uncertain terms, you cannot do that, as a Black British writer, you just stick to doing this, and this is what you're supposed to do. And this is another thing about going back to what we were just saying, you know, I think a lot of people have faced that over their careers, let's have it right. You know, I mean, a lot of people have had to deal with being told no, you can't tell your stories. No, you can't get out, oh, there's something else just kind of like that. Because it's happened to me so many times, and they've been stopped. And so so yeah, a lot of the anger is built up. And resentment comes from the fact that other people have been told, you know, the lost generation that Steve talks about... 'you can't make your work', you know, how frustrating for an artist that is, 'you can't make your work, you know, I mean, you can't express yourself'. And we're an expressive people as it is, in terms of the arts anyway, in terms of everything, you know, we like to talk we like to show who we are, you know, I mean, it's a part of our makeup. So to be stopped, you know, that can be some very, very damaging things to your psyche, and your spirit, man.

C Courttia Newland 21:35

So I've got a friend in the states called Shareen. And we talk regularly, you know, just about all and we're creative and we always always conversing about everything under the sun practically every day on text, you know every day, and we talk about this thing called the Golden back, we said, she talks about it, she came up with it. It's the golden back, she said, and that's the person who does a certain amount of things, in order to be able to create the thing that they really want to create the only and then they come back to the community. And I used to say to you, but three, no one does that, man. She's no but we got to do it. No one does that. But we got to do it. Steve is the only person I know that I've seen who's actually done that. And I said that to him after we after this was all said and done. We had a phone conversation I said to him, That's what I respect about you. Not the most, you know, I mean, it's one of the big things I respect about you is that you came back, you came back and Steve, all of his confidence and everything he you know, he can be quite quite humble about certain things. He didn't want to talk about that he was whatever, yeah. He got embarrassed. Sorry, to embarrass you Steve, again. I said to him, I really it means so much to us that you came back man, people don't do that. They don't win Oscars and then come back and talk about the community and people, I feel like people should respect that. You know what I mean, give him that respect, I mean, that he did it. He gave people work and gave people, actors jobs and brought people out of obscurity who are brilliant people. But you know, I mean, like, people stuck in their creativity, he gave them their voices and allowed them to be themselves, you know.

L Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 23:14

And the effect that that has on all of us as a community. So not just just you guys working on on the series, but I want to wrap up by because... just what we've just talked about is kind of led me to think about, okay, so new creatives listening to this, who have kind are at the point where they need to keep the faith, right, they need to, they need to know that what they're doing is relevant. And sometimes it's hard to communicate ideas to people outside of perhaps your own community who don't share the same frame of reference as us. So people say, you know, you can't write a sci fi as a black writer, or, you know, so we have to try and infiltrate that. And, and I'm just thinking about the communication with with whether it's publishers, agents, producers, whoever these creatives have to take their work to, like, is there just one thing that you can leave them with that they can keep in mind when they're doing it when they really need that face to keep going Courttia?

C Courttia Newland 24:15

I just think Keep in mind, the fact that you're trying to meet the right person. I'm writing a feature film right now, this is about a period of my life where I did door to door sales in a

pyramid scheme company. And I remember that pyramid scheme company taught me a lot about life, you know, they used to say to us, you're gonna go out there, and you've got thirty items to sell. And you're gonna see 100 people, and you're gonna get 70 no's, but you're looking for the 30 'Yes's. You're looking for the Vegas. In this, the odds are even smaller, right? So you're looking for the one person if you if you're lucky, it might be two or three. You might have a bidding war for your stuff, you know, but generally, it'll be One person who gets what you're doing and who believes in you. And that's the person that's going to take you somewhere. So all the time when you get into rejections, you just chalk it off, as this is one person closer to the Yes. You know what I mean? One person closer to the person I'm gonna find, okay, that's another no, out of the way, leave them people quickly forget about them. And I know it hurts. And I know it burns. And it's burnt me and hurt me in the past as well. But you have to keep going, because you're looking for that yes. And it's the same with 'A River Called Time'. You know, I got the Yes, like 20 years later, you know, but but you've got to keep going in order for that to happen. If you stop, you will never meet that. Yes. And I'm practically guaranteeing, and I know I shouldn't go out on a limb and say this, but I'm practically guaranteed that if you carry on, you will meet that person. That person is out there the person who understands and they can be from any race, my editor, Hannah Knowles, is white, my agent is Indian, you know, but they were the people I met that believed in this book, you know, and decided, Okay, we're gonna put you out there. And I met Steve, what crazy things that that Steve was the person who believed in my work, you know, I've everyone I met to that degree said, I'm gonna put you on you know, I mean, I think you should do something I bet loads of other people who were in that position, but didn't didn't believe in my work either. So, so it, it doesn't mean that you're wrong. I mean, it just means that you haven't met the right person.



Lou Mensah, Shade Podcast 26:26

That's a perfect place to end on. Thank you so much Courttia.



Courtia Newland 26:30

No problem. Thank you so much.