

Deptford Literature Festival Podcast

Episode 1: Jacqueline Crooks

Transcript

Shani Akilah

Hello and welcome to the very first episode of the Deptford Literature Festival podcast. A podcast that features short interviews of artists involved in the festival, celebrating Deptford and nourishing diversity and creativity through words, stories and performance. I'm your host Shani Akilah book influencer and author of upcoming short story collection *For Such a Time as This*. And today we are joined by the wonderful, wonderful Jacqueline Crooks. Thank you so much for joining us today. It's great to have you.

Jacqueline Crooks

Great to be here.

SA

Jacqueline is the author of *Fire Rush*, which was published last year, a novel that explores dub reggae, love, loss, freedom and black womanhood. It was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, the Waterstones debut author prize, and Jacqueline was named as one of the top 10 debut novelists for 2023 by The Guardian. So last year was an amazing year for you. Congratulations. I received a pre for *Fire Rush* towards the beginning of last year, and I absolutely loved it. So I'm a big, big fan. But for those of our listeners who haven't read your book, could you tell us a bit about *Fire Rush* and what inspired you to write the story?

JC

Fire Rush is about Yemaye, her two friends in a small town just outside London. It's about their life in the dub reggae underworld. I wanted to write something that platformed a woman's voice from the dub reggae scene of 1970s. There were lots of books out there by men who were DJs and musicians in that time, but we hadn't heard from the women and I wanted to really bring a woman's perspective into that place in time. It is very much based on my life. And so what I wrote about were the themes that echoed my experiences and the women that I consulted with: women of my generation who were in the world in that space and time that same time as me, I felt it was important to really put out some of those big topics around women fighting for their rights, not just from mainstream society, but within their own communities, fighting for safety and fighting against patriarchy. I thought those were important themes.

SA

It was very much a labour of love in the sense of it took 16 years, how was your journey to publication over those 16 years. And were there any kind of challenges that you encountered in that journey?

JC

I started to write *Fire Rush* around 2005 I just suddenly started to remember that I lived in that world and it felt like a lost world. It occurred to me that that scene, the language we had, the clothes we wore, the music. Not many people knew that world existed. It was a hidden world. And I wanted to bring it to life. And I knew it was a big story. I had a big responsibility writing about the double reggae world. I was representing my community and I knew it

wasn't going to be a one year two year project, I had to take my time, do the research. Not only was I drawing on my own experiences, I had to consult with others from the community get the data right. I was in it for the long haul. I knew that I didn't expect it to be 16 years long. But it took a long time to find an agent, publishers. I got an agent within five years they dropped me because they didn't want me to write so much patois and some other issues as well. The world wasn't ready for patois and nation language at that time, you know, 2005 in a way that was good not getting published earlier because it gave me more time to really refine the book. So many drafts came out of that whole 16 year journey. It has been a long journey. But I enjoyed every moment. And the process was like a journey for me of learning and understanding as much as it was about creating a book.

SA

That's amazing. And honestly, it was one of my favourite books of 2023. So if you haven't read it yet, I would definitely recommend buying a copy. Kind of moving on slightly as part of the Deptford Literature Festival. You're going to be involved in the music and writing panel chaired by Natty Kasambala and other writers who will be discussing kind of sound not only in their work, but also sound in culture in terms of the UK. I think music is very key to *Fire Rush*, not only in terms of dub reggae, but also your style is very lyrical. And I wondered if you could just speak a bit about your vision in terms of music for *Fire Rush*.

JC

I love music as much as I love literature. I'm Jamaican so for me, music is in everything I do. I wake up and I'm dancing, playing music singing whatever the challenge I set myself. When I'm writing about dub reggae, I have to some way, bring that music into the language. I set myself the challenge of writing music onto the page. Impossible to do, but I wanted to see what would come out of that endeavour. And I played around with the language a lot. I wanted to fuse Jamaican nation language, and dub reggae sound effects into English. So they had three languages all kind of plaited together. So music, I think, and words, the cousins aren't there. They're, they're connected. So it was fun trying to bring that dub reggae sound.

SA

And would you say that there are many similarities between dub reggae production and creative writing?

JC

Oh, that's a great question, Shani. Because Absolutely, that's how I approach writing this book, like dub reggae production, I would listen to music, I would tune in to the music, I would use cut and paste just like sampling. And there was a lot of that going on. I approached it. Like there's dub reggae engineers who are masters of their craft using technology and experimenting and trying something new and not being not being afraid.

SA

I guess with dub reggae echoing and fragmentation are a big part of what differentiates dub reggae from traditional reggae? How did you use that technique would you say?

JC

I use that that idea of fragmentation and samples of the italics introductions to the three parts of the novel, there's a fragmented voice that's woven in, it's almost like ghostly voice that you can hear on a dub track that's fragmented and comes in and comes out. That was my way of bringing that idea into the novel. Also, those italic chapters at the beginning of the three chapters, they are the b-side they're the versions, because there's this thing of versions in dub reggae and there's other split-off narratives are the version the b-side of the record of *eyewash* as a whole?

SA

I think something that really stood out to me was Yamaye's mum, her voice kind of coming in and out of the story, is that another dub reggae kind of production style?

JC

Absolutely. We never know where it's coming from who she is, Is she alive? Is she dead. And that's how those voices sound dub tracks, there's something ghostly ethereal about them. And we're never sure when they're going to come in, and when they're going to fade away and disappear altogether. And that's exactly why I want to use that Yamaye's mother, her voice in that way. Those voices that are fleeting, they come and they go, they're quite profound, they kind of leave a resonance even though they disappear.

SA

You mentioned patois earlier, and so I'm third generation Caribbean, and my granddad was Jamaican. So I spent a lot of time kind of growing up in Jamaica and growing up with Jamaican family in the UK. And it was really refreshing, really warm, and actually just to read patois. Why did you feel it was important to include patois in *Fire Rush*? And what do you think it adds to the story?

JC

I grew up in a Jamaican household, I was born in Jamaica, came here, lived with my grandparents who were rural Jamaican. And so they just spoke hardcore patois, and I did up until a certain point, that language is in my head, I've lost it, I can't speak it. But that's how I think. So it's my first language, I had to write in my first language because I express myself in an authentic way, if I use my nation language it had to be Jamaican and dub reggae has come from Jamaica, there was no other language I could use to write that book, I wouldn't be able to experiment or be as creative, it wouldn't have been true to the scene if I hadn't written it. So when I was told to write less, I wrote more, and I was glad to not really care. There's, there's that Jamaican rebel in me I was like: I'm going to do it my way. Thank you very much. So in some ways, it actually strengthened me and gave me a resolve to keep on going until someone somewhere would see the worth of that story in that world and look to publish.

SA

And I guess the tide did change when Marlon James won the Booker Prize for *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. And that was very much written in patois. And so the world just wasn't ready. It wasn't ready in 2005

JC

It wasn't it wasn't and you know, grateful to Marlon James and other writers who've written in nation language and made it a bit easier for us coming up after them to do our thing, so to speak, for sure.

SA

So there definitely is, like you said, a massive link between writing and, and sound and music. And I just wondered to what extent, music informs your creative practice as a writer.

JC

I mean, I hear the sound before I think of the word. So sounds, the rhythms come to me. And then the sentence comes to me. I can't separate music from my writing practice. I write the first draft with music playing. It's a very rhythmic process for me writing, and I'm always thinking of my sentences in rhythms and songs and lyrics, and sometimes I'll sing the lines I've written to hear how they sound. They're integral there they are one. I think growing up in a Jamaican household there was always music, whether it's in the Pentecostal church, whether my grandmother's singing, I don't think I can separate the two.

SA

And was it quite a nostalgic process when you were writing *Fire Rush* and just returning to the kind of dub reggae of the 70s and 80s?

JC

Very much so. Remembering all the people I used to rave with the scene, how special it was and how little we knew of its value, we could have appreciated more, all we knew was we were going in soaking up the vibes, dancing, laying off steam, but we didn't really place cultural value on it. We didn't know how special it was the stylists who all dressed up in their clothes and styled themselves to a tee, the language we'd created around the music, the toasters, the people who made the music and produced it and wired up the system. It was all one big, cultural artistic scene, I don't think we realised it then.

SA

And I think there are a lot more writers now that are speaking to the cultural value of, of music and the black community, which is really amazing to see. One thing that really stood out to me and *Fire Rush* was music as a refuge, a music bringing together the community. And I know, through your work outside of writing, you engage a lot with marginalised communities, vulnerable young people, the elderly, to what extent would you say that being involved in the community informs your work as a writer.

JC

I think it's number one on the list in terms of my purpose. Growing up in a migrant community, I was voiceless, my community was voiceless back then in the 60s, voicelessness is the driving force to my writing, but also to my work. I don't consider myself a career writer, I write but really, I run my own business working with community groups, and that takes up 70% of my time. And most of that work is all around giving voice to marginalised and socially excluded communities whether whether they be young people, older Caribbean people, refugees, and the two, my work and the community setting and my writing they're very connected is about voicelessness, and how we're missing out if we don't listen to those people on the extreme margins, we're missing, missing out on so much in

terms of creative vibes and the stories they have to tell. Ordinary people are so extraordinary.

SA

That really resonates in terms of my writing journey. And think from a young age I've really been fascinated by I guess, my grandparents, I think. My Jamaican granddad, I remember just being really young and just recording him on my phone. I loved all his stories of just like growing up in Jamaica and coming to the UK. And I think through my life as a writer, it's been really nice to, to write what he would consider to be very ordinary stories. It's given power to the voiceless, which is really amazing. Thank you so much, Jacqueline, for your time today. It's been really great to speak to you even more about *Fire Rush*, one of my favourite books from last year. Where can listeners keep up with your journey in terms of your future writing projects?

JC

I think Instagram is probably the place where I post things if I'm going to be performing some of my dub reggae women dancers and toasters, and that's the best place to keep up with the things.

SA

Perfect and what's your handle?

JC

It's @lluids and that's the village in Jamaica where I come from.

SA

Just for our listeners. Just a reminder that you can catch Jacqueline on Saturday the 16th of March at 4pm. For the panel discussion on writing and music. It's going to be taking place in the studio of the Deptford Lounge, it's free, but if you can't make it, it'll be streamed the next day. In the next episode, I'll be joined by Tice Cin, author of debut novel *Keeping the House* who will be curating the opening event at the Deptford Literature Festival. Jacqueline, thank you so much again for joining us.

JC

Thanks, Shani

SA

To our listeners. Thanks so much for tuning in. Take care. Bye bye