

Deptford Literature Festival Podcast

Episode 4: Femi Fadugba

Transcript

Shani Akilah

Hello and welcome to the final episode of the Deptford Literature Festival podcast. A podcast that features short interviews, artists involved in the festival that celebrates Deptford and Lewisham's creativity and diversity 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 Femi Fadugba. Hey, Femi. So great to have you today.

Femi Fadugba

Glad to be here

SA

Thanks so much for coming

FF

Cheers for having me.

SA

Femi is a writer and a physicist. He has a master's degree from Oxford University, where he published in quantum physics and subsequently studied as a Thouron scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. Before working in a number of different fields, including solar energy and consulting. Femi is also a young adult sci fi novelist and his debut novel *The Upper World* was published by Penguin Random House in 2021 and is set to be a Netflix feature film starring David [Daniel] Kaluuya. Massive, massive congratulations. I love the book, I can't wait to watch the film. What inspired you to write a sci fi novel that combines the everyday experiences of young people in Peckham, South London, with time travel and quantum physics? So how did we get here?

FF

Yeah, that's a great question. I'm sure you know that the answer to that question is, there's a lot of layers, your motivations kind of evolve over time as well. But I think my initial one, I think it was a passion for physics really. I studied it. And I remember a time when I was a kid, when I was really bad in pretty much every subject except for art. I was really bad at maths and physics. But I just happened to have someone who worked at my school who kind of saw a spark of curiosity in me and then said, you know, what, I show you about this physics thing. And I just got very interested in. I got passionate, and then it changed my life, because I ended up going to Oxford to study material science. And, you know, like you'd like you mentioned, I was doing quantum physics research there as well. And so I just thought, this is like the coolest thing ever. And there was a road in my life where it could have gone the other way, and I just never would have gotten that opportunity. And so my initial thing was just: okay, how do I open this road for other people, in my situation. 16 year old kid, from Peckham from anywhere in England, actually, who just doesn't think that they have this side of their brain there. They haven't explored that that corner of their mind, essentially, I realised that the best way to hook someone in is by telling a story. I had never written a book before. But being the kind of person I am, I basically learned how to, learnt how to write, by reading

books on how to write. And I took a very scientific approach to [it]. I lived my whole life until I was 30 years old thinking, I'm a maths and science person. I'm not a writer type person, until I had somebody come and say, is basically just like talking but writing it down. That's the origin of it.

SA

And why did you decide to set it in Peckham? Because I know you've lived in lots of different places. Why did you decide to set the story with characters from South London?

FF

I really struggled with the location actually, because, as you mentioned, I've lived in a bunch of different places. I was born in Togo, my parents in Nigeria and lived in the States for a while, which is why I have this weird American twang sometimes as well. I spent loads of time outside of London as well in place like Oxford, I went to boarding school at some point as one in Somerset. So all over the place. And I struggled with where I could get away with saying I was from, because I felt like no matter what choice I made, I wasn't sure if people would be like, Okay, you have the right to tell this story. It was a tricky one. And in the end, I went with Peckham for a couple of reasons. Not necessarily because I felt like it's where I felt most solid. I don't really feel like I'm from anywhere to be honest with you. But I chose Peckham, because I first moved there when I was nine years old. And I was living with my aunt. I continued living on and off there, right through to the pandemic when I finished the book. So it was the one place where I had enough of a consistent couple of decades just to describe how this place has evolved because the story itself takes place over a couple of decades. So I needed that. Second thing was, part my heart is definitely with Peckham, like I think, strangely as somebody who feels a bit from a few different places. It's actually one of the few places in the world where that's okay. You have a lot of people in fact, who you know JJC you know, fresh from Nigeria but also British and you have you know, Pakistani, you have everything going on there. And so it's actually one of the few places where it was okay to be the way I was. There's jokes, in Peckham them as well. So I wanted to make a book that was funny, and had some life to it. And so it just felt natural.

SA

So for people who haven't read the book, can you give like a quick elevator pitch about what *The Upper World* is about.

FF

It follows two teenagers basically. So one is the boy named Esso and he's based in in Peckham, London. And he's like the average kid, he's got two different friendship groups. One is a group of fun-loving sort of piss-taking mates that he hangs around with school. And the other group is a group of boys who are also fun-loving and piss-taking, but few them are ganged-off and pulling him into situations he really does actually want to be in. And then he's also got Nadia who sits at the front of class at school when he's obsessed with that. And it's trying to figure out a way to tell her that he's obsessed with her. And one day Esso's sprinting to catch the bus that he takes to school. And he sees in the middle of the road, a kid about to get run over by a Range Rover, and he has a split second to decide whether he's going to save the kid or not. So he says, do you know what I'm going to do it and so he runs into the middle of the road and pushes the kid out of the road, but he gets smacked by the car, and knocked out not just out of consciousness, but out of this world completely, and into this

place called The Upper World. And The Upper World is a place where you can see time, the way it's described in physics. So the past, present and future almost appear as different portals that you can enter. That each secondary life from the moment you're born, the moment you die, is there and you can theoretically step into it. And so he steps into one, and he sees a glimpse of the end of his day. And every one he loves and cares about including Nadia, including his friends are going to die, it looks like they're going to die. And so he gets spat out of this premonition of his future, and back into the streets of Peckham. And he realises he has until the end of the day to stop what he saw happening, happening. And then you got Rhia, the second character in the book, 15 years old also from Peckham but this is 15 years in the future. And she is super ambitious, doesn't really know who she is, because she's never known who her parents are. And then all of a sudden, one day, this random guy named Esso comes into her life and says, Hey, I know exactly who your parents are, I know where to find them as well. And it's in this place called The Upper World. So it's a story about love, violence, and the physics of time travel that just so happens to take place, in Peckham

SA

Obviously physics is a really big theme in the book. But I also was really interested to kind of see like the philosophy elements. Did you also from a young age have exposure to kind of philosophy and you speak quite a lot about metaphors and language? Where did that inspiration come from?

FF

I think anybody who studies physics long and deeply enough, you can only do it so long without getting into metaphysics. So if physics is all about nature, and what's all around us and explaining how it works. The word meta means beyond. So it's like: Okay, what's beyond physics? Like, yeah, you have nature. But you also have these laws of nature. Where do those laws come from? Because they're, like, invisible, but they apply everywhere to everything. Where's the stuff that that stuff comes from? When you're studying physics you see these beautiful equations $E=MC^2$ that describe the universe into these incredible things. Except for where does this come from? Why is it so orderly and elegant and beautiful? What's going on beyond what we can see? That's really what inspired that once I got more into physics, and I saw the beauty in it, almost like a divine beauty in it. I was just like, what's going on here? Like, what am I looking at? I didn't intentionally try and make it philosophical. But I couldn't properly explore physics without having a bit of an exploration about what's going on.

SA

That is so cool. And I think the themes of free will and hope really come through as well in in the novel, whilst also dealing with some like really contemporary kind of issues, gangs and foster care, and you're able to, like merge lots of contemporary themes that relate to many people in South London communities was also bringing into that time travel and quantum physics and questions about freewill. It was really, it was really good. I really enjoyed It

FF

Which is another area I struggle with, by the way. I think there's plenty of positive representations in the book, like Esso is a professor and story of hope and advancement and ultimately, an educational focus. But I also show some, like, darker stuff. And there's

always a pressure, at least I felt it when you're representing the Black people how much you can show and maybe I'll never find on this side of eternity if I did that right. But I feel like my goal really was to reach the people who were in the worst situations who've never had a book written for them. You know, in certain ways, it's probably gonna look a little bit negative to the middle class, typical middle class white or Black person,

SA

But I also do feel that you define narratives as well. So one thing that really stood out to me was Rhia playing football. But even though that the reality like Black girls playing football. That's something I haven't seen represented in literature and characters who are interested in studying physics and like interested sci fi movies, like, I feel like you went against the traditional narrative as well.

FF

It's a tricky balance. But these are the decisions you make when you're when you're writing.

SA

And just on the Netflix store, first of all, you've got a 15-way auction for *The Upper World*, which is absolutely insane. And then on top of that, your book was picked up by Hollywood, and you've got this Netflix deal. How has that journey been in terms of the book to screen adaptation and your involvement as one of the executive producers?

FF

First of all, the journey and like getting picked up was crazy, because by the time I finished *The Upper World*, I was like, you know what? This book is sick. People kept on telling me, you know, it's really hard to get published first of all, no matter what. People were saying, you know, also like, you're trying to do Black stuff, plus maths? Like, you try to lose everyone? Those things were true. But I was also like: but my book is sick. I basically sent in my submission, ready to fight. I was like, I'm gonna have to fight and somebody's going to finally say: Okay, this book is sick. None of that happened. Like it just immediately they were like: This is sick. Love it. Which surprised me to be honest. And so by that point, I had my gloves off, I was okay. It's safe now. And then yeah, the interest is just mad. You know, and this is, the weird thing about writing is you can figure out how to tell the truth, really tell the truth, like and pay the cost that it cost to tell the truth, because the truth is not cheap. People will hate you for it, a lot of people won't like it. But if you can do it, then I think it has a chance of resonating with the Zeitgeist, and for whatever reason it did. Then Netflix came along. So I was having these zoom calls with the Hollywood studios, in my aunt's third bedroom in a council flat in Peckham and it was a bit mad, honestly, that was amazing.

SA

So in terms of the Deptford Literature Festival, you're going to be running a workshop for young people 11 to 15, entitled *Story Algorithms 101*? Can you tell us a bit more about what the workshop will entail?

FF

Yeh sure, just a little bit, though, I don't want to spoil it. Basically, I've got kind of an algorithm. It's not a computer algorithm. I know, everybody's now, everybody knows what an

algorithm is because of Chat GPT. I'm talking something very basic. I'm talking about something you can do on paper. But an algorithm really is just a series of steps that you use to execute something you want to do. So in this case, it's a series of steps that you take to write a short story. So we'll get together as a group. And I have a series of questions that I ask for each stage of the story. For each question, people get to throw out different ideas, and we roll a dice, and then whoever gets chosen becomes the scene for that. And then we'll move on to the next scene. And we just keep going until, as a group, we've built a story that we'll all agree is pretty compelling.

SA

And what is it that you would say you want participants to take away from the workshop?

FF

Just that the storytelling thing isn't as mysterious as you think it is. That we've all got stories to tell, and that we're actually all natural storytellers. And we're doing all the time. And with a little bit of structure a bit of time a bit of help. You can write a story.

SA

I love that. Femi, it's been so great speaking of you today, thanks so much for coming on the show and making time. What's the best way for people to stay up to date with kind of what you're up to?

FF

Ahh, I'll find you guys, don't worry. Honestly, I'm off social media. I don't even wanna.... I'm off. I'm in my lab. When I need you to hear about me, you hear about me? I'm going to come visit all of you in your schools. We'll get to hang out. We'll all be good.

SA

Fair enough, no, I hear that. Well, just for our listeners, just a reminder that Femi's workshop *Story Algorithms 101* will be taking place on Saturday, the 16th of March, from 4 to 5pm. In Room 1 of the Deptford Lounge, it's free to attend and BSL will be provided. This is sadly the last episode of these podcasts. But you can keep up to date with all things Deptford Literature Festival on the website spreadtheword.org.uk where you can sign up to the many many events on the day most of which are free, as well as keeping posted on social media @STWevents on Twitter or X and [spreadthewordwriters](https://www.instagram.com/spreadthewordwriters) on Instagram. Thank you so much for tuning in and hopefully catch you in person or online for the festival. Take care and goodbye