

**Katharina Scheerer:** Good morning and thank you so much for being here Aliya. We are very happy that you agreed to this interview, as your work plays an important role in our exhibit and it's a great opportunity for us to discuss some of our questions with you today.

**Aliya Whiteley:** Great, I'm delighted to be here!

**KS:** For those who don't know you yet, I'll briefly introduce you before we start the interview. Aliya Whiteley is a British novelist, short story writer and poet. Her novels and novellas have been shortlisted for multiple awards including the Arthur C. Clarke award and a Shirley Jackson award. Her short fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Black Static*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Dark*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and *The Guardian*, as well as in anthologies such as *Unsung Stories' 2084* and *Lonely Planet's Better than Fiction*. Aliya, you have already published several novels in the sci-fi and weird genre fiction, like *Skyward Inn* or *The Beauty*. They all deal with humans encountering entities, or might even say aliens, that are completely different from humans in ways, for example, language, ideology, but also corporeality. What is it that fascinates you about the motif of being confronted with something that is so different from us humans that our perception and our senses doesn't even suffice to grasp or understand what's going on?

**AW:** I think when you look at issues of talking to aliens or something so far removed from yourself, that's a great place in which a writer can explore ideas about what it means to be human. Sometimes I think, when it comes to communicating with others, being human is like being trapped in a large bubble. You can press up against the skin of the bubble, but you can ever know if you're managing to get through it, to talk to anybody else, to really be a part of the world around you, to know how you're affecting other people... Everything is filtered through your bubble. That's the only way you can experience the world. The more you push against that by introducing strange happenings outside of the bubble, the more it throws that idea out there and you look more closely at the human experience by examining the alien experience, through the lens of the alien experience. I'm really interested in that. I think it all comes back to wanting to try to get a sense of what it means to be human. And if it's ever possible to know if that experience is the same as anybody else's. Human, alien, plants, whatever it is. How is their experience different from the experience of anything else that we're a part of? That can be on an individual level or a race of beings, a planet. Going from very small, kind of day-to-day business of your own thoughts and feelings to being part of a planet.

**KS:** In your short story *Peace, Pipe*, the protagonist tries to communicate with an entity that she perceives as water flowing through a pipe. She not only tries to understand the message that this entity she calls Pipe is trying to convey, but also draws conclusions about the concepts that structure this entity's understanding and perception of the world. Could you maybe elaborate a bit on the ideas that developed in these passages in terms of language and perception?

**AW:** I think in *Peace, Pipe*, it was quite important to me that we never know, and we never find out if there is an entity there. So again, it's about pushing the idea of what's out there, how far is this a construction of the protagonist of the story. And I wanted to use something that could be interpreted in a lot of different ways. So I came up with the idea of water, because I think there's a part in the story where the protagonist talks about how water could be many different things. It can be stagnant, it can be flowing. When we picture water, you can picture the ocean, you can picture it on a chemical level, you can picture it as a beautiful sea, it can be aesthetically pleasing, it can be the thing that keeps you alive. There are so many levels. I'm really interested in these words we use that cover a huge expansive topic

like love, like air, like water. There's so many different things that we're actually talking about when we use this short word, and we use the short word because that's easier than trying to actually break it down. Sometimes the more words you add, the further away you get from what it is that you're trying to say. So Pipe has this fluid but tiny vocabulary, and the protagonist doesn't really get a lot of chance to learn a lot of it. It suddenly seems to become, from one drop of water to a huge ocean of communication. But that's all her. I say her, but it could be a him. It's all within the protagonists themselves. So the water's also a barrier in a way, and a way through, like a waterfall. It looks solid, but you could walk through it. And I just wanted it to be representing on so many different levels.

**KS:** As we already heard in the last question, the entities in your books sometimes display even completely different corporeality than a human one. In *Peace, Pipe*, that's not only Pipe but also other beings that the protagonist is confronted with that she can't fully grasp and describe by human terminology. One example are the tree-like forms of life that the protagonist tries to communicate with to stop a war. What encouraged you to choose tree-like figures, which I usually perceived as passive and benevolent as antagonists?

**AW:** I wanted exactly that. I think part of the reason for writing *Peace, Pipe* was to explore the ideas that we simply take for granted or don't question when it comes to humanity and our role on the planet with each other but as part of a larger organism. We have certain expectations by trees and what they're like. They don't move. They don't speak. They're just there, looking pretty. We already know there's a lot going on in tree life on this planet that we don't think about a great deal. In terms of literature as well, there's a history of trees as benign beings, if they are given personality. I think Tolkien's ents were probably, in my mind, a starting point. So I wanted readers to bring the expectation of a tree form as being something benign, something peaceful, and then being able to play with those expectations was what I was aiming for. Actually, I think it's got to do with size as well, because trees, we think of them as quite large. The creatures that we're trying to stop a war against, Beaverins, they are so small and unimportant and I wanted that to be the juxtaposition of their sizes and their roles within each other. When humanity turns up on that planet with their expectations of what trees are like and what beavers are like, it was really fun to frame that, and also look at it more deeply.

**KS:** And could you let us know how the communication between the protagonist and the tree-like is finally established? Because they have some difficulties in the beginning, and the protagonist is not quite sure how she can get into contact with the tree like forms.

**AW:** Yes. In the story, a device is created that is part organic, part technical, mechanical and the device is plunged deep into the earth. I think it's a good while since I wrote the story. That sends out a strong message which they're hoping would be translated kind of rhythmically into signs of peace, of good intention. What interested me about that idea was that it's a bit like sending an enormous letter and you have no idea what's going to come of that. It's not communication, it's just throwing out your message. There's no ability to listen back with that and the message they send is so powerful and forcefully center cross that it ends up killing the very thing that they wanted to communicate with. That's so sad but I do think communication does need delicacy and I wanted to get across the idea that simply shouting through a megaphone at somebody in the hope that they will hear your side of the story is not the same as listening to theirs.

**KS:** We have already talked a lot about how literature enables us to imagine and explore things that are usually out of our mental reach. Could you just very briefly say what the strengths of, especially the science

fiction genre, are, when it comes to imagining and speculating about how things might be? But also where you think the limits are to use literature, as one might even say, a tool for speculation?

**AW:** I think science fiction isn't a tool for predicting the future, but it's very much about looking at what's happening now in the world, and how we translate that. For me, when I use science fiction, it frees me from a lot of the demands of having to accurately represent the world as it seems right now in terms of political structures, or the demands that are placed upon us on a daily basis. I can be free of a lot of that. And by removing those obstacles, I think we reach a better, deeper truth about the human condition. Science fiction has a way of cutting through many of the demands of the here and now, in order to let us have a space and time in which to see ourselves clearly now, but also picture the future without having to feel that we're predicting or prognosticating. When we talk about things like outer space in the form of a novel, it's so often representing the human condition of loneliness, of the big philosophical questions that we ask ourselves and have been asking ourselves for a long time. And I love the fact that we look at words in that way, and that science fiction gives us a freedom to do that, so I think that's why I write science fiction.

**KS:** Thank you for so much for this interview, we really appreciated it!

**AW:** You're welcome!

**KS:** For those who are now curious to learn more about Aliya's works and other novels and films that deal with communication between plant species and humans, I can only encourage you to visit our exhibit, starting this May!