

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

This is Write Your Novel, and I'm Yvonne Battle-Felton. I'm a novelist and lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. And in this podcast, I'll be in conversation with other leading novelists, as we explore the writing process. This series delves into the decisions that writers might face, and looks at how to make the most of the writer's toolbox.

In each episode, you'll hear one writer talking about one book, to shed light on one narrative device. So there may be the odd spoiler, as we go under the skin of their writing and their process. At the end of each conversation, there's a writing exercise to help you try out the technique in your own writing. Funded by Arts Council England, supported by New Writing North, this series is very much for you, the writer. Let's get started.

In this episode, I'm joined by the writer, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi. Born and raised in Uganda, the country's influence on her body of work is ever present. Her first novel, *Kintu*, won The Kwani? Manuscript Project in 2013, and was awarded the prestigious Windham Campbell Prize for Fiction in 2018.

In this discussion, we're focusing on her latest novel, *The First Woman*, winner of 2021's Jhalak Prize, the novel details the coming-of-age story of young Kirabo, as she navigates her complicated family life and awareness of special skills she possesses. Amidst the brutality of Idi Amin's Uganda, we see Kirabo undertake her quest to find her mother, and how she deals with this obvious absence in her life.

For this conversation, we're focusing on structure. Structure is the foundation of a novel. For me, it's not my starting point for writing, but for some people, it will be. First, Jennifer reads out a passage of the book, which helps to set up our discussion.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

"Once a day came, when a man, his name was Luzze, married his woman. 'Would he marry a woman instead?' a boy sneered under his breath. Kirabo ignored him. 'They had many children, but they were all girls,' a girl snorted as if Kirabo's story was already predictable.

"Luzze became sad, as every time the woman had another girl. At first, he thought it was bad luck that girl babies kept coming. But then the woman made it a habit. Every time, girl, girl, girl, girl. One day, Luzze called her. 'I've been patient,' he said, puffing on his pipe. 'But I've decided to bring someone else to help you.'" Kirabo took a breath to gauge her audience's attention. The teenagers were silent, but their ire was still stiff in the air. "That year, Luzze married another woman. Though they had many children, they were all girls.

"Luzze despaired. Why were girl bearing women not labeled, so he could avoid them? Still, he married a third woman. She bore him many children, but the two were girls. One day, Luzze called his three wives into the house and gave them an ultimatum. 'From today onwards, you, or you, or you,' he jabbed a finger at each woman, 'bear me another girl, don't bring her home.'

"That year, the women worked harder. They fell pregnant. The first one to deliver had a daughter. One look at the baby, and she was packing. The second delivered. It was a girl. She too, left. When the third delivered, it was a boy. She lifted her breast to the sky. But wait, there was something left in the stomach. She pushed and out came a girl. The woman despaired. She looked first at her son and then at the daughter, at the son again, and then the daughter. She made up her mind."

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Jennifer, thank you so much.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Thank you for having me, Yvonne. I've been waiting for this for some time. I love having a chat with you, Yvonne.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You're not only generous on the page, but then you're generous off the page. And that goes with sharing information, sharing insights, even talking about your craft and how you write. So I feel like with this book, it's one of those things, and I don't know how many times you've already heard this and I'm still going to say it again. So for me, I feel like books taught me how to be. And it taught me how to feel, and how to remember that everyone has a story, and that sometimes they do things that I don't necessarily agree with or like, but they help me to be empathetic. And books make me a better person.

I've been, growing up, reading Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston. And returning to those books, they're the sorts of books that I go back to, and I always see something new. And it's either what I needed at that time, or something that just touched me in a way. And then I feel like *The First Woman* is one of those books for me.

I have read it now and re-read it, and re-read it. And every time, it seems like there's something else that I either missed the first time, or it didn't hit me in that same way. And then I read it now, and I'm just like, "Oh, yeah." So I think one thing I'd love to know, and I don't know if there's a clear answer to it, but how do you do that? You create a book that people can come back to, and there's always something in it that they need, or that they see clearly, or that they understand in a different way.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

That is a very difficult thing to talk about in terms of how you create layers, or how you drop things on the page that could be read in different ways from different readings. But what I normally do... And I don't know whether this is the reason. First of all, thank you for saying that. But what I do normally is that I start with the story.

For me, any novel, the book must work at the story level first, so that I take the readers on this journey, as people say. And they're following the character and they are into this place, and they're in this culture, and they're rooting for her, or she drives them crazy, but they just can't help loving her. That kind of thing, I work on that first. So the story must work at that level, because there are a lot of people who are going to read the book at that level, and walk away satisfied.

But then I'm also aware that there are people who are going to come back to the book and look for more. And that's when I start to ask, what is this book doing? Because remember, Yvonne, you set out to write a book. But the book itself is doing other things. And this is where you, as a reader, who is also a writer, comes into play. You read a lot of books, and you see that the book is going down south, but the author is going up north, and they are disagreeing.

And often, you're going to find threads hanging. And this is where you're frustrated. And you say, "But this was an exciting something that should have been developed, but it was

left hanging." That means that the author didn't see it. And so this is why as an author, you must be a good reader, a damn good reader. So this is why I don't rush a book to publication, because we get word blind. If you keep on editing and editing, you are following those ideas that you want to impose on the book.

But when you put it away, let's say six months, you're reading other things. And this is where teaching is so wonderful, because then you forget about your book. You're just reading students' writing. And then you go back and read your story, or your novel, and you realize it's doing other things. So you develop that, or you mutate.

But for me, whenever I go back, I pick on something and I develop it. I pick on this and I develop it. And I asked myself, what would I want from this? So I think it's because the books that I write take a long time with me. So this one I've had it for 20 years, so basically it had to work hard. But also in that process, all that time I was writing other books, I was teaching and I was reading. And so every time, I kept going back to it.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that you talk about the different layers, because I think that's exactly what it feels like. And it feels like there is the writing of it, the narrative voice, all of that feels really generous. And it does feel like if you've introduced something, it's wrapped up or it's returned to, and there's all these different layers and levels of understanding.

And I guess one thing I'm really curious about is how you organize this all, how you keep everything, as the writer, how you keep track of everything. So there would be something and I'd be like, "Wow, this is really interesting." And then something else would happen and it'd be interesting. And then at one point, I might forget the other thing. And then the narrator comes back to it and I'm like, "Yeah, that's right." I know as the reader, you took us along. Things were woven together. And there were things that returned in a loving way, in a tender way. How do you keep track of who's doing what, when?

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Oh, first of all, I am that kind of reader. I really love to be taken back to anything that I've forgotten about, to characters that I had dismissed, to discovering places that I had seen 30 years before, and what they're like 30 years later. I think as Tony Morrison said, "We write the books that we want to read." And so Yvonne, I must enjoy my book. It is very important that I enjoy the novel, that I enjoy the story.

There are moments when I'm writing that I fall out with characters and they drive me crazy. But when I do, I must enjoy it. And when I enjoy it, I believe that the reader will enjoy it too. So it's this going back. I am such a perfectionist, and I think it comes through in my novel. And I keep going back over and over, and I ask myself, would she do this? Would this happen? Is this natural? So all of that helps me to pick up on things that are going on.

And sometimes, Yvonne, I don't even realize. I could be cooking. I could be swimming. I could be on the bus. And suddenly, I realize, "Oh my God, of course, this is where she's going." And then I write on my phone and send myself the text, because I'll forget. And then I come back, and I include that. And then when I read back in the novel, the whole story, I see how the part that I've added connects with the bits that were present already. So all of that must work, but it's very, very hard to keep track on all of that, if you write a novel in a

year and submit it. So this is why for me, the books are going to take a very long time to write. And this is why I do rewrites and rereads all the time.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

So the book opens up in 1975, and then we go to 1977, we go to 1934. We go to 1983. Can you talk to us about structurally, it's not in chronological order, and can you talk about when did you know how you were going to lay out the book, or how the book wanted to be laid out? At what point in the writing did you always say, "Okay, I'm going to do these years, this year and these years," how did you decide?

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Indeed, actually, time and point of view are big in terms of determining structure. So when I first wrote this book back in 2001, it was one stretch of a novel from beginning to end. But then I started to realize that certain characters were strong and they were interesting, and that I could develop them in that respect, so that they stand out. And sectioning does that very well.

One part was removed, because the book was pretty big. And now they want it, by the way. Once I sectioned the book in that way, that I'm going to look at point of view, so this is Kirabo's story. But from this section, it's going to be really focused on the witch. It allowed me to develop the witch a lot more. It is interesting. You don't realize how it happens, when it happens.

But once you get a character and you put them out there and you say, "Okay, this one is important," the character then starts demanding for more. Who am I? What am I? How did I end up like this? And you write a lot more about them, rather than the main character, because the main character you're always focused on her or him. You're always developing them. But once you elevate these characters to have a point of view, or a perspective, you elevate them. So that is one aspect that helped me structure the book in terms of these perspectives.

But of course, the other one's time, because again, the book is told a little bit, mostly from Kirabo's point of view. And she's limited. She was not around in the 1930s. And by the time I had elevated, for example, the witch, she demanded that I go back to her childhood. And that part, where you go back to meet the grandmother and Nsuuta, when they were young, that was the last part I added. That was the last part I wrote. Yes. I then realized, there's no way I can explain these women without going back into their childhoods.

So again, the book has a way it forces you to do things that you hadn't set out to do, because of structuring. And all of the things, the funny thing is they all happen organically. Had you asked me when I was writing the book before, "How did you come up with this?" Probably I wouldn't know, because we write at an unconscious, or the subconscious level. It's until the book has finished and you're like, "Oh my God, I did this. I did that. Oh, wow. This works."

But of course, again, having had it for a very long time, it's allowed me to go back. And if you look, actually, you'll find that even in those sections, even within the chaptering, I still break them and give you a space. When I break, I expected someone to stop and take a breath.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I guess, because it looks like you've done a lot of research to create this world, and that gives us the logic of the fiction. Can you talk a bit about some of the research that you did, and I guess maybe some of the research that you did and didn't use, because maybe it didn't fit?

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Okay. The funny thing with me; research is done in relation to the story. Again, I always put down my story first, and then look for parts that need research. Because when I do research before, you're going to discover a lot of stuff and say, "Oh my God, the world needs to know this. Oh my God, the world is going to change once they realize this." And then the research takes over your novel.

But often, I always do my story, my characters, put them down and then say, "Okay, where do I need research?" And sometimes this is when they're for time changes. And I say, "Okay, I've set it in 1760. No, let me go back 10 years before. That would be more interesting." Research does that, but it doesn't touch my story. And so often, the research I use, most of it gets used. But it's when I'm editing that some of it sticks out like a sore thumb, because you just stuck it in there, because it's an interesting idea.

But when you start editing, you realize, no, it doesn't work with your character. It doesn't work with your, probably, place and whatever. And in the end, you edit it out. But I really noticed that... I think I know that I do more research than I use. Sometimes I can do research for a week and I take just a sentence. I could have pages and pages of research that I've done, and just get a paragraph.

So for example, the part where I go back to the 1930s, I went back to Uganda to do physical research. Because in this book, I wanted to introduce the idea of slave and slavery. But I didn't want to bring it on head-on, because there's a lot of denial in my culture that we did not take part in slavery. So I did a lot of that research, first of all, in Bank of Uganda, the main bank in Uganda, they have their history, how trading started and whatever. And so those were first one to disabuse me of that history that I learned in school. And they said, "No, no, no, no, we did. But what we did, we sold other people. We just didn't sell our own people." And I suspect that's what everybody did.

And I was so excited and I wrote so much. Then I went to my mother, because this book, Natteta, is set in my motherland. So I wanted to know the history of Natteta and the naming. And so my mother was born in the '40s, but I wanted to set the book in the '30s. But I thought if she could tell me her childhood, where she went to school, what was going on, what school was like. And she got her older brother, and they just walked me through family history and the region's history, but I didn't tell them what I was going to do with it. I hope my mom doesn't hear this, but I got her grandfather, and absolutely did stuff with him, because he was very interesting. But I made him shorter, I made him worse. Well, he's family folk, Yvonne.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Jennifer, you're awful.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

I am. I am awful. And so I took my mother's family history and I distorted it, but I knew she was not going to read it. But she had all these knowledges about the Kabakas, who came to visit her grandfather, and what kind of house they had. And there's a lot of information, some of it beautiful, that I wanted to include, but the story would not let me.

So this is how I did research. This is how research did not end up in my book, and I hang onto it and I think, "Oh my God, maybe in the next novel, it might find its way there." But often, it doesn't. But the story must be spread. The story must dictate what research ends up in the story itself, to embellish it, to develop it, and what cannot work, even if it is exciting and wonderful.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Jennifer, I absolutely love that reminder. If it doesn't fit, then it just doesn't get to be in that story.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

No, it doesn't.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I wanted to ask about, so you've woven traditions and myths, history, and then you say family history and village history. And I'm going to quote you here, "which I have distorted and perverted with happy indifference," along with your own stories, to craft a book that spans generations. It's richly and fully exploring themes of identity, belonging, relationships, family, friendship, religion, secrecy, forgiveness, in the context of war.

What were the rules in terms of writing? Like what themes and topics were you free to explore? And where, if anything, did you decide you wouldn't or just could not go?

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Okay. So as I told you before, I always start with a story. So here, I started with Kirabo, the character and her search for her mother. That has always been the story. But I also wanted to write about traditional childhood in the villages in Uganda. And that only came about when I came to England, and I saw how Africa was presented, as if all of us were dying. So I imagine people looking at me in the street, and imagining that I had grown up looking like those kids you see on TV, when they're asking for aid.

And so I thought I should put out something else beside that narrative. This is the nature of the way the West has presented us. So I wanted to put that forward. But then as I went along, and of course, because the book stayed with me for a very long time, the book itself started to go in different directions.

I started to see things that I could do with other characters, because Kirabo was going to do the childhood, and she's spoiled and life is wonderful, blah, blah, blah. But then I started to see Abi. She developed a lot later after Nsuuta and Kirabo. And then Aunt Abi also took me in directions that I could do. And then I realized that there's a blockage somewhere with a certain character, and I felt, "Okay, you're going to die, because you're not helping. Step out of the way, so that my women can shine." But that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.

I loved him, but he had to step out of the way, so that women could see each other. So it's that kind of thing that I did, again, organically, in order to allow all that that book could be,

all that those characters could be. And know that I could extract from place, because I do work with place as well, and see how much it can give the book.

And you know, Yvonne - and this I'm saying to you as a fellow writer - when I've done that and I feel exhausted, I do not read the book again. So yes, I have never read Kintu again. I've never read the short stories again, because I suspect I'm going to read this book and find out I could have done that. I could have done that. Stupid you, why did you rush it?

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I love that idea though, that once it's done, at some point, it's actually done.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

It's done. There's nothing I can do.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think I'll definitely remember that. And maybe also reconsider whether or not I return to books to reread them, that I've written. So can we talk about the use of the local language, or words in Ugandan, that were not translated into either UK or American English?

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Okay. First of all, my use of local language happened when I shifted my idea of the ideal reader of my book and made them Ugandan. And I made them East African, and I made them African. Because of course, I had grown up reading Western books, and I had started writing as if I was Western, and writing for Western people. But the minute I made that decision, language changed, characters changed, attitude changed, but also the subject matter changed, because there are things that I can talk to my people easily about. Things that I'm not going to tell the rest of the world.

But the way language changed was in such that where English was unbendable, where it was racist, where it just refused to take my culture, I just switched to my language, because you know what? It's as good as English. And if I understood English, because often, I read novels which had French, which had German, which had sometimes Russian, but I did not understand that, that didn't take away my enjoyment of the novel.

But I am generous. Often, where you have a word that is not translated, the context, always make sure that the context will help. Because remember, though I am writing to Ugandans and Africans, we don't all speak the same language, not even in Uganda. So I always imagine, will a non-Makondo understand me? Would a Luo in Kenya, in Tanzania, in Uganda understand me? Will a Nigerian understand me? Will a South African understand me? And if I believe that the Libyan understands me, I'm done. The rest of the world, you can fall into the line. You will understand.

But there's also, literature is moving away from this universality. Readers around the world need to be aware, you are traveling into a different culture. If I'm taking you to Uganda, it is going to come with language, with food, with smells, with everything. So I'm not going to erase everything and put it in English, just because. So it is a lot of reasons why you will find those words.

But the first thing is that often, the translation killed it. Characters fell flat. It just didn't make sense. But also, I don't mind privileging my Ugandan, African readers, because they

always get it. These questions don't come from anywhere else. They come from Europe. Because in Africa, we are aware that we're always traveling into worlds where we don't speak the same language, but it does not matter. But we are going to persist, and I think the West will get it eventually. They will get used to it and thankfully, there's Google.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Thank you so much. That was a wonderful answer. Thank you, Jennifer. And see, your generosity comes through, even in that, even in the, "Well, this is what I'll explain, or this is what I won't, but this is who it's for. And they're going to get it."

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Yes, absolutely. But you know what? I grew up being an outsider in most of the novels I read, and it was wonderful working my way into the center. The West is going to find out how wonderful it is to be outsiders, and work their way into a culture that they didn't know. It is fantastic. They've been missing.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You've also so woven in Idi Amin and that regime. And I guess, can you talk a little bit about that? Because I think for me, what it gave me was potential, even though it's within the fictional construct, but it still gave me a different view of something that I might've heard about through Newsweek and CNN with a different lens. Which even though the news, it gives you a certain perspective of things, and history would have given you a certain perspective, that fiction brings that historical perspective to life in a different way.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

The minute I set it in 1975, I just could not escape Idi Amin. But I had grown up with Idi Amin as this larger-than-life character. And also, when I came to the West, every time I told somebody I'm from Uganda, they would go, "Oh, Idi Amin." And you're like, "No, he's not our biggest export. He's not a cultural product. There's much more to us than Idi Amin."

And then again in Uganda, there's a way that he was perceived. The middle-class saw him differently. The working class saw him differently. I look at him from a child's point of view. And the reason I'm insisting on this is that when you put Amin in your book, he takes it over. He is that kind of character, because he comes from history. But also, when you put that kind of history into fiction, there's hardly a line between fiction and history. You can go to places you didn't intend to.

So when she's in the village, because Amin is mostly affecting the city, you only see him on the wall, in the shop. And Kirabo remembers what women are saying about him. But it's until she arrives in the city and you arrive with her, that you realize, "Okay, she's having sugar here, but she didn't have sugar in the village." And she's wondering, where does her father get sugar or biscuits? Things like that, that people in the village do not have access to. But Kirabo is not going to tell you about embargoes that were put on Uganda, because that's not a kind of language she understands.

But also, after coming back and seeing that, you hear what has happened to Sio's dad. People can see therefore, how Amin affected the middle classes in this book. But I just

wanted to limit him to that. I didn't want people to see him. I didn't want people to hear him. I just wanted people to see how Kirabo experienced him.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think that's a wonderful way to balance history, and the influence you allow it to have in the book. But also acknowledging it throughout, because you're right. I guess it would have been odd if no one had been touched by him or that regime during that time.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Yeah, absolutely.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You did a wonderful job with it, I felt.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Oh, thank you.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

You have been so generous. And so can I ask, I'm just going to ask one more question. You've given us so much advice, I think, for writing that first draft and for structuring, and all those things. If you could give listeners, myself included, one piece of advice when we're looking at the structure for our books, what would that piece of advice be?

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi:

Let the novel decide its structure. Let the story guide you. Don't impose your structure, your ideal structure on the story. It just doesn't work. And readers pick up on it quite quickly.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Inspired by the discussion with Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi on *The First Woman*, this exercise focuses on structure. First, we're going to start with a scene or a story. This might be something you've already written, or something you create for this exercise.

The first step is to write a story. Take as long as you need. This story might be the premise of a longer work, a chapter from a longer narrative, a story, flash, short, longer form, or a scene. Once you've written it, set it aside for a few days, so that you can approach it with a new perspective.

Now, returning to the story, ask some questions. What is the story doing? Are all of the loose ends tied up? Who are the interesting characters in the story? What do they want to say? What more do you want to know about them? What do you want the story to say? What is it saying?

Now, considering those interesting characters, write a scene or two, or a full story from another character's point of view. You can spend as little or as long as you want on this stage. You might write the same scene from a different perspective, or something that might've happened before or after the original scene or story, that provides insight and develops the narrative, tension, character and/or setting.

This character's perspective provides access to something another character does not have access to. This access may give the writer, as well as the reader, other ways to get into the story. You might find that it reveals something even more interesting than what you had planned for the story. You might find that this new point of view character is better revealed using another narrative voice or tense. Consider where they are, who they might be telling, and what they want to say. Where does the new perspective lead?

So that's it for our discussion around structure. Just one of many explorations that I hope will get you nearer writing your novel. Thanks again, to my guest Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi. Her book, *The First Woman*, is available at libraries and bookshops online and off. Write Your Novel was presented by me, Yvonne Battle-Felton, and it was produced by Candace Wilson. The music was by Joe Gardner. It was a Sonderbug Production for New Writing North, with the support of the Arts Council England.

Next time, the conversation continues with Pat Barker, talking about developing a character. See you there. And if you want to know more, you can follow me on Twitter @YBattleFelton. And don't forget, the conversation continues on the Write Your Novel Discord server. For more information and to sign up, head over to the New Writing North website.