

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

This is Write Your Novel, a podcast all about developing and writing your novel. I'm Yvonne Battle-Felton. I'm a writer and also a lecturer in creative writing. In each episode, I sit down with a different leading author to discuss a specific mechanism or technique to get inside their writing craft and what we can learn from it.

This series is to help you develop the confidence and tools to begin developing, writing, or reworking your novel. Funded by Arts Council England, supported by New Writing North, Write Your Novel is very much for you, the writer. Let's get started.

In this episode I'm joined by the writer, Paul Mendez, born and raised in the Black Country and now living in London, Paul burst out in the literary scene with his debut novel Rainbow Milk in 2020, and it's the book we'll be talking about today. As a writer, he has contributed to The Times Literary Supplement and the Brixton Review of Books.

Rainbow Milk has been featured in The Observer's prestigious Top 10 Debut Novels list and was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize. Rainbow Milk introduces two characters. In the Black Country in the 1950s, Norman Alonso has moved to Britain with his wife to secure a brighter future for themselves and their children. Blighted with unexpected illness and racism, Norman and his family are aware that they will need more than just hope to survive.

At the turn of the millennium, we meet Jesse seeking a fresh start in London, escaping from a broken immediate family, a repressive religious community, but finds himself at a loss for a new centre of gravity and turns to sex work to create new notions of love, fatherhood and spirituality.

We'll be focusing on Rainbow Milk for a discussion on point of view. As a writing technique, point of view includes who the narrator is, how and when the story will be told and may include who the narrator is telling and why. First, here's Paul reading a passage of the book.

Paul Mendez:

This is the opening of the book, Swan Village, July 20th, 1959.

"This the best summer since we come to England three year ago. It hot, not hot like Jamaica but I don't feel a cloud pass the sun today, and no rain has fall for a long time now. I stand on my front lawn and breathe. The bush them strong with plenty of fragrant rose.

"My son Robert love to totter round with the watering can, that almost as big as him. I can hear how much water is pouring on each root. I don't know how he can't feel the cold water dribbling upon his foot. Strong little man. He is going to be tall; already is quite up to me knee. Glorie want to help, but she's too small, and I have to listen for her all the time in case me trip up on her or she scratch herself on the thorn.

"Not too much, son. I said to Robert, when I can hear the water start to puddle. Move to the next one. 'Allo, little man, am you helpin' ya dad water the garden?' Mr. Pearce, me neighbour, make me jump as he walk up in path. 'Say hello to Mr. Pearce, Robert.' 'Hello,' he say, all quiet. I say, 'Good afternoon, Mr. Pearce, how are you today?' Knowing he will just go on and on about his ailment. 'Oh, I int too bad, you know. Same old aches and pains. Me arthritis has been playing me up summat rotten, but I can't complain. Ethel int well herself with her legs. Cor wait til your lad's big enough to run down the shops for we. Anyway, it's a bit hot for me in the heat. It's alright for you coming from the West Indies.' 'Not really,' I say. 'My body used to the cold now.'

"I have hardly any sight left, but I know Mr. Pearce never leave his door without his flat cap, old work coat and boot, though he must have retired from the gas work 10 year ago. 'You must've heard all that's been happening down London with all them White Defence League rallies and that. We was ever so sorry to see they'd painted them Keep England White or whatever it is on your door.

"Me and Ethel was talking about it the other night and we both agreed that we don't mind you being here at all. We'm all the same, int we, white or coloured or not.'

"I should not be still here in the sun, like what the doctor said, because my head start to throb and darkness falling on my eye. So I stepped closer to the house, in the shade. 'Well, that is very nice of you, Mr. Pearce. Your bag must heavy. Why don't take them inside, and we'll talk later on. Robert, where are you?'

"'Here, Daddy,' he say, still watering the rose and singing to himself. He love the new Cliff Richard song Living Doll, and he don't know the word, but he can sing the melody in his nice little voice. 'Remember to water this soil, not the floor. Where's your sister?' 'There with the block,' he say, like I'm stupid, cause I can't see what right in front of me. Cha. True, now me see the blur of her white gown in the middle of the lawn and hear the crack-crack of the block as she bash one on another."

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Thank you for the experience of Rainbow Milk and for the writing of it and introducing us to Jesse and Norman and their stories.

Paul Mendez:

Thank you. It's been a while since I wrote it, obviously. So it's somewhat difficult for me to remember the processes that I went through. But Rainbow Milk was based on what was ostensibly a memoir, so it was a 300-page manuscript in the first instance that I had sort of cobbled together based on journal entries and various sort of essays, personal essays and little bits of poetry that I'd written over a period of about 15 years.

So when Sharmaine Lovegrove became publisher at Dialogue Books with this remit to discover new voices from LGBTQIA+ communities from Black and Asian British communities, from other minority ethnic backgrounds, working class writers, writing about disability, I just jumped at the chance to send her this work. I had no sort of idea really what the potential was for it. I had no intention in the first instance of it being a novel, but she and her colleague then, Dominic Wakeford, picked up the manuscript and within a few pages were just like, this needs to be a novel. Because when you're writing about such things as the Jehovah's Witness community, when you're writing about sexual assault, when you're writing about trauma, when you're talking about broken family, all of those things are very close to my personal experience.

So I was very much holding back. There's certain people I didn't want to upset. There was a certain sense of me being this kind of lonely, isolated, very poor person who was potentially taking on this enormous independent religious community that is active in 192 countries worldwide and has a turnover of several hundred billion pounds, so I was afraid. But in this becoming a fictional piece, I was able to completely step away from my own story and start writing about someone else who's going through different things, maybe hitting the same kind of emotional beats, going along the same emotional trajectory, having many of the

things that I've been through in common, but it's always different: different people, different places, different situations involved, all of which were created by me as fiction.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

One of the things I thought was quite fascinating is a lot of times when we're writing about life and even when fictionalising it, we talk about the ethics of it. And the idea that, if the idea is not to hurt other people and that responsibility of the story. And we don't always talk about that fear.

So one, thank you for talking about that, because I think it's something that will stop a lot of people from writing that memoir, writing that story. And in some cases it might be best to step back and to say, well, what am I afraid of? And if these are really real concerns, to look at it in another way and to try it maybe as fiction or as something that feels comfortable or more safe or just more settled.

Paul Mendez:

This is why good editors and publishers are so important, because they will encourage you, and they will also know the boundaries. So they will encourage the truth out of you, but they're responsible. They've got legal teams behind them who will be aware of what you're writing and will advise you on what you can and can't do. But in the first instance, I think writers should be absolutely free. And I think editors and publishers should encourage, especially young writers who don't have the experience, should encourage them to really sort of speak their truth because that's what we want from writers really.

We don't want everyone to write the same book, because not everyone has the same experience. Not everyone is going to see things the same way. What's so valuable about literature, and what's so valuable about the literature that lasts, is that individual viewpoint and that truth that comes from that author through their experience and their language, so that's absolutely what I would encourage people.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think you're right. And I think that potentially dangerous slope of, if you don't have someone to hold it accountable and to do the editing, it's the potential that you overstep a lot of boundaries or go into places where maybe even you weren't ready to go. And so I wonder if, for that, and for people considering self-publishing, I would highly recommend investing in that team.

And so still treating it like it's a business, it's a book, it's a product, and investing in that team to support and to say, okay, I need to hire a professional editor. And maybe that's where all my money goes and really helping it to make its best chance or make its best impact.

Paul Mendez:

Yeah.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Can we talk about when you are fictionalising it, and you were talking about that truth and every author having their truth. And when you're writing fiction that's semi-autobiographical, where can you expand and explore and fabricate truths?

Paul Mendez:

Well, Jesse grew up as a Jehovah's Witness as I did. He grew up in the same place that I did, but his congregation members are all different. They're all sort of fictional characters I created, or the situations that he found himself in. So on September the 11th, 2001 knocks on a door, so Jehovah's Witnesses are obviously famed for preaching from door to door, so he's working on his own one day and knocks on the door, and it's a topless man who answers the door, and he's just sort of absolutely flustered and Jesse doesn't know what's going on. And it's just after 1:00 PM BST.

And so he invites him in, this householder, to watch the news, because this terrible thing is happening. And obviously, it's the attack on the World Trade Center that's on the news, the program has been interrupted. And this householder is one of a gay couple. So it's this gay couple that Jesse finds himself sitting with watching 9/11 happen. And it's the first time he's ever been in the presence of two gay men. He's suppressed his sexual truth, the truth of his sexual orientation all his life, because it's enough from a Jehovah's Witnesses. You're not allowed to be gay.

So this extraordinary sort of completely life-changing thing is happening on TV and 3,000 miles away in real life. But in his absolute presence is the real truth of who he knows he wants to be, is happening in front of him as well. So it's like a real kind of moment of rupture for Jesse in many ways. My experience of 9/11, my experience of coming out, the reason why I was disfellowshipped from the community of Jehovah's Witnesses, were all very different.

If you're writing from experience, you look at the whole trajectory of your experience. Where can you merge characters? Where can you merge events to make it more powerful? You're still speaking your truth, but this is literature now. It's not just, this happened to me, that happened to me in this order, because there's no drama there, there's no dramatic tension. All of the things that we value in a novel, tension, pace, drama, characters playing off each other, dialogue, that comes to the forefront. Your story has to sit behind that somewhere.

So yes, speak a truth, but always look for ways in which you can tell a story that people will find compelling, entertaining, that they will learn from, that they will understand your perspective, that perhaps they share the experience. Everyone knows what they were doing. Everyone remembers what they were doing one night on September 11, 2001. But this is a very special circumstance involving a very special individual person, experiencing it in a very different way from anyone else. And that's why it's so kind of vital.

So many people have pointed out that scene as one in which wow, that really resonated with me. When I was thinking about what it would be to fictionalise my own story, I did look to the likes of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. And it just seemed to me actually that you didn't need to know that they were semi-autobiographical, because they just worked as novels, right?

And if you're an individual and you're unique and you live the life that you live, what is it to anyone else whether it's fiction or autobiography? But it is about the craft. That's what

makes it a novel and not just, this is me, this is what happened, this is what I'm still dealing with. I think that the difference between those two things are vast.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

So we have Norman who we absolutely love, and we have Jesse who we absolutely adore. And so England through Norman's point of view, it's not like the England of brochures. It's not like what he's imagined, and just taking some from the book. So when they arrive in Bilston, it's black with soot, and he says nothing in Jamaica compares with Bilston. "We leave the Garden of Eden for the Land of Milk and Honey and find Sodom and Gomorrah. Instead of rolling hills, mountains of trash. River of crude oil. Blast furnace for trees."

How does Norman's England differ or compare to Jesse's, and Jesse was born and raised in England. But how did their perspectives change?

Paul Mendez:

So Norman grew up in Jamaica where he received the standard English or British colonial education, where you're just taught that Britain is the great seat of the world. Britain controlled two thirds of the planet. Britain had the greatest Navy, the greatest sea presence, the greatest army. One of my first exposures to this sort of mentality of the Windrush generation was Andrea Levy's Small Island where Hortense, she learns one of Wordsworth's poems off by heart and thinks that she speaks with this absolutely perfect cut glass English accent and can imagine when she moves to England, having daffodils of every colour in the room of the rainbow in her front garden. And she'd sit on her veranda with her white gloves on drinking tea and her neighbour would come out of her house into her garden, and they'd wave to each other and say 'good morning.'

And that was the fantasy that she had of what ... well, it wasn't even a fantasy, that's what she believed England was. And so when she came to England and saw that perhaps it's like that for some people, but not for her as an immigrant, a Black immigrant at that, it was a real shock to her. So I was just very kind of aware of the difference in perspective and how an individual is going to experience the reality of the metropolis, the mother country especially at that time.

My grandparents, all four of them came from Jamaica in the 1950s. Whenever I've asked my grandparents in the past, what was life like for you when you first moved here? They were just always, they didn't want to say anything. They didn't want to tell me. They were very circumspect about it. And it was only really towards the end of one of my grandmother's lives. She died in October 2019, and I think I asked her this question in May that year, what was your favourite job that you ever did?

And she said, I worked in a brick making factory, and it was all women and we all made bricks together and it was great fun. I loved that job. And I couldn't imagine my graceful, elegant grandmother lifting bricks. It was just complete news to me. It was a real shock. But her nails, how perfect her nails are, I'm like you were making bricks with those hands, really?

But I think so many of that generation try to forget the past. They tried to forget the trauma that they'd been through. And they came here to have a better life, to raise their children as English people, because of the fact that Britain sort of perpetuated this myth about itself, that everyone in the colonies swallowed up. They assumed that they would come here and

have a better experience, have a better life, that income's better, white was better and that their children would be defacto white people.

And so for the character of Norman, I looked at my paternal grandfather who died when my dad was two years old. So he was fit and healthy. He was tall. He was like 6'4", came here with my grandmother in 1956. But then as soon as my grandfather moved here, he started to experience migraine headaches and sight loss and eventually went blind.

And they went to a doctor and the doctor said, it's because you're so tall and you're closer to the sun than the rest of us, and the sun is very different here than down there in the tropics, and sort of basically brushed him off, and my grandfather died. He moved back to Jamaica because my grandmother couldn't care for him and raise two children and work. So he moved back to Jamaica where he died. So I really wanted to explore his character.

I had done some acting in the previous year. I'd played Othello in a non-professional production. So you're this Black general, you've kind of come so far and you've conquered racism or so you think, but then there's this whole kind of other racism happening behind your back. And you're being sort of led through someone else's concept of who you are or should be that is very destructive and ruinous.

So I put my body through that. I learned the lines, I gave him a voice and that really inspired me to do exactly the same with Norman. So I created a physicality for him, literally as an actor, I put on a blindfold. I was living in Brixton at the time with a family who had a small child who was two years old, and whose toys were sort of strewn all through the house, clothes everywhere, et cetera.

And I sort of started walking through the house with a blindfold on and was just so kind of shocked at how I'd lived in this house for four years by then, but I didn't know where anything was. I could have been anywhere. I didn't know where the walls were. I didn't know where I was putting my feet. And so for a 6'4" Black man who has two small children and is blind and is the stay-at-home father while his wife has to go out and work because he can't work anymore, that would be a real concern for you.

Where are the children at all times? I don't want to step on them. I don't want to trip on anything and fall and crush my one-year-old daughter. So it just got me realising how tenuous his life had become and how that would compare to the hopes and dreams he and all other Jamaican and people from all over the Caribbean, people who came to the UK with this, the pavements are paved with gold kind of mentality, what the reality actually was. And so I literally recorded a monologue with this kind of frame of mind, and it just sort of came out of me and I transcribed that, and that became the first draft of Norman's perspective. And it was really easy to write in first person and write in Jamaican Patois.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I think it's beautiful that you embody the character in that way to bring a story to life, and I was curious about that. So we get to know Norman in first person present tense, and we see Jesse's in third person past tense. And then, so they both seem to allow for different levels of intimacy and different ways for us to get to know the characters. So we have access to their internal thoughts through internal discourse, free direct discourse. We have their kind of internal monologue and it brings their life through their eyes. It kind of shows us what the world with that experience might be like. So just a couple of questions about Norman's

perspective. And one thing I was really curious about, and it seems to be, I guess, showing a lot in this part. And I guess I'm just curious what it allows you to show.

So Norman calls Mr. Pearce, Mr. Pearce. He calls Mrs. Pearce, Ethel. And so these are his neighbours. Mr. Pearce calls him Norman, and he calls his wife Claudette. When they're talking, Mr. Pearce asks about Norman's wife and he says, "and what about Claudette? Ethel was saying she never sees her now. She thought you might've locked her up in the basement or summat," and then "him laugh." And Norman says, "I force myself to laugh a little bit with him, even though it hurts my head."

So there's some things going on there. So there's one, there's what Norman's thinking versus what he says and what he hears, and there's the accents. So one thing I quite liked was that we don't typically or I guess I don't typically see English accents, just like I don't see American accents on the page. And just that reminder that the way people speak sounds differently to people who don't speak that language necessarily as their first language.

But then we also learned something, and it's about having access to Norman's thoughts. And I think it was something with that beauty of the first person. We know that his head's hurting, the conversation is painful, but it's painful on a couple of levels. And then there's that element of respect and intimacy, that familiarity that comes with calling someone by their first name. So can you talk a little bit about what that access to Norman's thoughts allows you to show?

Paul Mendez:

Yeah. Class is one thing. I guess respect for white man, especially as an immigrant or an immigrant of colour, you want to sort of share respect. There's a lady across the road also called I think Mrs. Philpott who's a bit of a snob, and I guess it's sort of deferring to people's class. And Norman tells us that for the first six months of living in that house, and before he planted his rose garden and became the envy of the estate, his neighbors wouldn't talk to him. They wouldn't say hello.

So there's perhaps little vestiges of that remaining and the way he addresses Mr. Pearce. I didn't ever sort of consider giving Mr. Pearce a first name. It was just always Mr. Pearce. So from Norman's perspective, I guess that translates to, perhaps he feels like the camaraderie he has with his neighbour is conditional, which sort of suggests that, okay, you're doing okay.

You haven't sort of caused any trouble so far and your rose garden is very pretty and it smells amazing, and you'll make our house look better because your garden's next door to ours. And that's, I think, quite a universal experience really for Black British people, certainly of my generation and people older.

So yeah, there's definitely the respect thing. And I think that Ethel and Claudette, when Norman's not there perhaps and Mr. Pearce isn't there perhaps, probably have a different relationship. They probably get on really well, Claudette being a mother of two children, Ethel, probably having children herself.

What we see through Norman is very much what Norman knows and what Norman sees himself. Norman doesn't necessarily feel comfortable addressing Mr. Pearce on first name terms. So yeah, I just thought it was really interesting and no one's ever sort of pointed that out actually, but that's quite a subtle sort of takeaway about relationships and class sort of

being sort of mutable, I guess. And the sense that class plays a huge part and time really is the thing that sort of, I don't know, allows relationships to settle. Yeah.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Yeah. Thank you for that. So Norman's section is just so rich and I just love him. I just love the life that you've given him, the personality, this line from the book. So for me, he's really decisive, really proud and confident, although of course he's worried that because he's losing his vision, and he's worried about what might happen to his children.

But back in Jamaica, when he was working and his shack was torn down and his boss says to start work on the other side of the ground or he will take back my job. So I wish him all the best to find a better gardener than me and walk back home. And I'm thinking, yes, so he stood up for himself. So we have his personality, his mannerisms, the memories of things that he shares. It really draws you in. And this is something I always wonder when I'm reading first person narrative, who does Norman think that he's telling? And is it important for the writer or the reader to know while they're writing?

Paul Mendez:

I think he's just telling the reader. I don't think it's anything more complicated than that. It's an interior monologue. My grandmother used to talk to herself all the time. And then you'd be like, what did you just say? It's like, mind your business. And I'm like, well, you just said it out loud in my presence. So obviously, I'm going to have questions. I think that's like a bit of a Jamaican thing. I don't know.

But yeah, I just wanted him to be, Norman is speaking sort of towards the end of his young life. He's only 33 years old, but it's like a beautiful summer's day. And he's at home with his children and he's watering his rose garden with his two very small children. Then he takes them inside after sort of speaking to Mr. Pearce, takes them inside. And they'd made Toto that morning, which is a kind of sweet coconut cake, which sort of allows him to sort of flashback to when his mother taught him how to make Toto in Jamaica.

So there's always a present day and there's always a sort of a sense of reflection, and it's always back and forth. And sometimes his son sort of interrupts him when he's having an emotional response to his own thoughts, which we, as the reader are privy to. So I mean, he's not necessarily talking to us, he's basically appraising his life at the end of his life. And I've just made it possible somehow in this kind of magic, basically.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Let's stick with that. I love the idea. And why I had the laugh when you were saying your grandmother talks to herself or, because I do it all the time. If I'm going through something, like if I'm trying to figure something out. I feel like usually it's me trying to figure something out, and I'm just grappling with it. And it's not that I need other people's advice or their insight. I'm not asking for it. And I know my poor youngest, because he'll be like, I don't know the answer to that. And I'm thinking, why would you, but because I'm not actually asking him, but I do, I talk to myself all the time and I quite like the idea of a character just being like, this is for me.

Paul Mendez:

Yeah, exactly. Especially when you're a bit put upon. I do it myself actually, comes to think of it. And it's when I'm cooking in the kitchen and I speak Patois, and that is the only time I speak Patois. So we live right on Hampstead Heath. So on summer nights, for example, it's like a festival out there. It's just noisy. People are playing music full blast.

And then on the other side, there's always work being done to some house. I mean, you could probably hear something in the background now, like a circular sander or something that just really sort of ... so I'm in the kitchen, cooking, I'm like, "Lord Jesus, that people they're not shut up now." And I'm just like, why am I doing this? I sound exactly like my grandma.

Them people they're nice. But it's just borrowed behaviour, isn't it? My grandmother used to babysit me when I was a kid, so I was with her all the time when I was a child. And she'd be in the kitchen, my first ever memory is of being in the kitchen with my grandmother. And I'm probably only two or even less. It's a very tiny fragment. And I can see my grandmother with her back to me, standing at the stove and she's probably muttering to herself.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

I quite love that. And something else that comes, it's definitely the voice. Both voices are distinctive. Both characters, they have different motivations. Although they both want love and family and understanding and to take care of someone or be taken care of. So one thing I wanted to ask, so when we first meet Jesse, he's on his way to have sex for money. And we see his journey there both in terms of physically on the bus and then mentally, as he sort of talks himself into it.

There's descriptive scenes. And through these scenes, we see Jesse and Thurston have sex and it's a physical intimacy. I'm really interested in the intimacy you've created with the reader. For me, it's in those insecurities, like knowing how much he has in his wallet, knowing the first time he couldn't do it, knowing he hasn't always been safe, doesn't know where to get tested, and he's just so very vulnerable. What does that third person narration allow you to show?

Paul Mendez:

The third person decision happened very late on in the process. So I'd handed in Rainbow Milk without Norman's story. Just Jesse's first person story in January 2019 and three days later, retracted it from Sharmaine who was very unimpressed, because the book was already five minutes late and said, look, I'm really sorry, but this isn't Rainbow Milk. I have to at least attempt this in third person, because what was happening in first person was because Jesse is so close to me, despite the fact that I created all of these different scenes for him in different sort of modes, it was still as if I was personally experiencing them.

When you're writing in first person, it's okay when it's Norman, because he's so different from you, he's living in a different time, he's living in a time that I wasn't alive even. So it's really easy to step into his first person and it's almost a performance. But when it's Jesse, and he is almost exactly the same as me physically, et cetera, the only place I've got to go is memory.

And that is very difficult because you're constantly reopening old wounds that you don't quite have the support structure and the sort of psychoanalytic ability to be able to take care of yourself while you're going through those times again. And these are traumatic

experiences, being a 22-year-old young man, you've only been out for a year. This is me I'm talking about now personally. You've only been sort of out as a gay man for a year, and you've moved to London and now you're a sex worker and you're sort of doing an acting course full time, and you have to pay your fees and that's why you're doing the sex work. And you're meeting a different guy every day, a different stranger.

At the time, I don't remember feeling any fear or ... I just sort of went for it. I had complete confidence and I wish I could recoup that confidence. But it was, I think, based on ignorance, because anything could have happened. And certainly now as an older man, I'm in my late thirties. I was in my mid thirties when I started writing *Rainbow Milk* as a novel. It was just extremely difficult to revisit those events, because I just couldn't believe that I put myself through that, and I was just so kind of happy to have survived it, because any client could have been a really dangerous person.

I was meeting people sometimes without seeing their picture. The money was talking, and I'd just go and meet them in a particular place. This is before social media. This is while I didn't know anybody in London, and I was estranged from my family as well. So I had nobody to fall back on. Nobody would know where I'd gone.

So these are really sort of difficult moments to write about in first person, because I'm constantly reopening wounds that haven't really healed. But writing in third person, it allowed me to completely move away from Jesse and to be safe, happy, content, 30-something Paul writing about someone who is 19 and naive and putting themselves through all kinds of things, just to divest themselves of this doctrine that they believe in but that doesn't believe in them because they're gay.

And it just sort of opened up a whole new way of being able to tell your story. I was able to put the camera, I was able to play the role of a director rather than the actor. I can use this, I can use that as an analogy, but keep the camera very much on Jesse's shoulder. So we're seeing things through his eyes, but always told through this kind of more mature voice.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Thank you so much for that. You've been so generous with everything. And I feel like there's so many tips in here for writers who are grappling with that first draft and looking at where might they go? What point of view, whose story is this that I'm writing? All of those questions that we all grapple with when you start a new project or even when you're well into the book. What advice might you offer someone when they're considering point of view for their next, or the draft that they're working on?

Paul Mendez:

Well, the only advice I ever give and the only advice that I would ever give myself as a younger writer is just to read and read everything. Read widely, read. We have so much incredible literature now. The last few years has just ... we've just seen so many previously underrepresented voices being published in first person, in third person. So many debut novels now, so sophisticated.

And I would just really kind of concentrate on reading, because that is how you're going to sort of develop the muscle so that you're flexible with point of view and voice and language and all of those things. You will soon find your own special way of being able to tell your story, because it doesn't matter how incredible your plot is or your anything. Point of view is

so important, because if you're writing in first person, it can just sometimes feel really flat. If you're writing in third person, sometimes it can feel really flat.

It just depends on the material that you have. You just have to find the right way to be able to sort of tell the story with excitement and tension and all of the things that we really value as readers. And you only get that through reading, I think. I was always very impatient as a young writer, and I wouldn't read enough. I'd literally sort of want to speak before I listened.

And that is the advice that I give to anyone starting out now, just be patient. Patience is everything. Your book will be much better if you slow down, read, give your attention to other writers who've come before you and who've made the same mistakes maybe and found ways to conquer them. Then you'll come back to your work so much stronger and with much more formed ideas as to how you want to tell your story.

Yvonne Battle-Felton:

Inspired by the discussion with Paul Mendez on point of view and Rainbow Milk, for this discussion, we're going to first read and then write. First read or reread a book or short story with point of view in mind. Whose story is it? And what do they want you to know? Who, if anyone, might they be telling? When are they telling it? How has the writer drawn you into the character's world? What do you as the reader need to work out? Is the narrator reliable, unreliable? What secrets might they be keeping?

Once you've read or reread the book or short story, let's write. I think you'll need about half an hour for this. For this exercise, write from the point of view of a character you don't ordinarily read a lot about. This might be a waiter, bus driver, post person, best friend, sidekick or another character underrepresented in fiction.

Once you have someone in mind, consider a place that the character knows well. This might be their place of work, where they live, study, someplace they travel through, a place they visit. Now that you know who and where they are, what's their story? You might want to stick to the basics and list what they want and what stands in their way. Want to be more detailed? It's up to you.

Once you know more about them, give them the pen. What's their story? What do they want to say? Let them tell it in their own words without worrying about being judged or another character walking in just yet. Once you've finished this exercise in first person, it might be useful to give them a time limit. This could be a natural one. If you put them on a bus, they have until the end of the journey to tell their story. This might mean an introduction, the highlights or the whole story. Maybe they have 15 minutes of silence until someone comes through the door. What do they need to say in that time?

Great. Now that you know them even more, you know what the character wants to say and what they don't want anyone to know. Change from first to third or second person and see what changes. What do you need to show through action, dialogue and/or free indirect discourse? What stories might be revealed if you give this character a voice? I would always recommend reading it in the voice of that character as a way to further develop the voice. I always try to perform it, then you can really hear it. Have fun.

So that concludes our episode on point of view. Thanks again to my guest Paul Mendez. Rainbow Milk is available in all major bookshops and through libraries on and offline. And this also concludes our series. Thank you very much for listening, and I hope it has inspired you to explore your writing and try new things.

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 funded by Arts Council England and supported by New Writing North. If you want to know more, you can follow me on Twitter, @YBattleFelton. And don't forget, the conversation continues on Discord. Head over to the New Writing North website for details on how to sign up and stay connected.