

Ferdinand Dennis interviewed by Samenua Sesher, Respect Due, Museum of Colour

00.01

Introduction Music

'Intro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00:08

Samenua Sesher

You're listening to Respect Due.

00.16

Introduction music

'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

00.22

Samenua Sesher

For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. The Museum

of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves.

01:09

Ferdinand Dennis

My story starts in Kingston, Jamaica, 1956. And I stayed on that island until I was about eight years old, and then came to Britain, to London. And yes, I spent the rest of my childhood in West London - North Paddington.

01:29

Samenua Sesher

You're listening to the multi-talented author and broadcaster Ferdinand Dennis. Ferdinand has written and published three novels and two non-fiction books - all deal with themes of African, British and Afro-British culture. His books have often been accompanied by radio documentaries for the BBC. We began by talking about his early series for Radio 4, *Journey Round My People*.

01:54

Ferdinand Dennis

So, in 1985, I was working for a London-based, Nigerian-owned magazine. And they sent me to East and Southern Africa to report on the political situation and to find correspondence for the magazine.

And so, I entered - or re-entered - the African continent, because of course I'd been there before: I lived in West Africa, from 1980 to '82. And on this occasion, I entered - re-entered - the African continent through Nairobi, then travelled to Kampala, Uganda, and then back to Nairobi, then on to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, then to Lusaka in Zambia, then to Harare, Zimbabwe, and to Maputo in Mozambique, so that I was on the road for about two months, in the autumn of '85.

And I parted ways with the magazine some months later, but along the way, as well as doing the formal reporting on political events in Eastern and Southern Africa at the time, I'd kept a sort of diary which appeared in the back of the magazine. And this diary was about encounters with people in bars, taxi drivers, and so on; and that was bought by the BBC, by Radio Four, and became a series of five programmes called *African Encounters*. And they commissioned me -and this is an idea I put to them - to do six 15-minute talks about a journey through Britain, through Afro Britain. It was my choice, you know, that. I didn't want to say black Britain, a highly problematic term at the time, and I think it probably remains so today. I was very clear to myself that I wanted to focus on primarily the African, Afro-Caribbean population in the UK. So, I started on that journey in Liverpool; I went from Liverpool, I think, to Sheffield and to Birmingham, to Bristol, into London... oh yes, I also went to Cardiff. And the series went out, and I, because my interest had always been in the page, I turned the material over again into this sort of travelogue.

04:20

Samenua Sesher

That travelogue was Ferdinand's first published book, *Behind the Front Lines: Journey into Afro Britain*, which was awarded the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize in 1988.

Could you tell me a little bit about the political and social context, so, the time that you were writing that book and how it was received?

04:40

Ferdinand Dennis

So, the political and social context of the eighties... It was quite an exciting time, it was my first decade in the world of work, and a whole number of political forces and political trends that pretty much characterised the post-Second World War age was coming to a climax. One of them was the Cold War, the other one was the anti-apartheid struggle; and also, within Britain, the need to rearrange Britain - this sort of post-imperial phase, it had lost its colonies and so on. So this was the age of Mrs. Thatcher, of Margaret Thatcher, as the Prime Minister. She came into office in 1979 and was there for a decade and completely reconfigured Britain.

But it was also the decade in which there were riots: the 1981 riots up and down the country, inner-city riots. I wasn't in Britain at the time, I was teaching in northern Nigeria, but I'd seen the forerunner to those riots in 1980, when I worked in Birmingham for a project which worked with young black offenders. And it was quite amazing that there were all these kids... when I say kids, I mean teenagers of 18, 19, that kind of age, and they, you know, got into trouble with the

police, they were all Rastafarians, they had nothing but contempt for the authorities, no regard whatsoever for the authorities, and they were just pouring through the legal system. So what you had was a whole generation of kids who were more or less British-born, but they had not been able to find their place in the society. You know, there were no jobs for them. There were no jobs for an awful lot of white people as well, it has to be said, because, as I say, this was a country that was going through sort of post-imperial reorganisation, reconfiguration, on the economic front, you know; many of the industries that had sustained employment in the past were failing.

And so, you had that economic decline then combined with racial discrimination, and kids who were heavily influenced by an ideology that was coming out of Jamaica which legitimised withdrawal, protests, and dreams of Zion and of escape. So, the music was really so important in the 1970s, into the 1980s, you know. I was thinking of Burning Spear's 'Slavery Days' and 'Marcus Garvey', and so on and so forth. So the kids who rioted had been exposed to some of this music, you know, and in a way they had been converted to, you know, converted to Rastafarianism, and the various blues dances and shebeens and so on around, and, as I say, it carried a very radical message, and it touched this sort of raw nerve, you know, this past, this hidden past that they had not been taught about.

So that was part of the context. The other part, as I say, was, by the late eighties, the Berlin Wall fell; so that particular struggle was played out, the Cold War, the triumph of the West, democracy, capitalism, etc, etc. And on the back of that the regime in South Africa was... in 1990, they declared that Nelson Mandela would be freed. Now it may seem

quite unconnected with the kids on the streets, but they... for me, they were all connected; it was a period of upheaval.

And those were the people I've met as I travelled around Britain in 1987; really first-generation or second-generation Britons, who were looking to find a place in society and having tremendous difficulty doing so. Because the society had really not, in a way, prepared for them. You know, their parents came here as workers, and I guess the expectation was that they would return back to the Caribbean, or wherever they came from, and that there wouldn't be a second or third generation to deal with. But there was this, you know, second and third generation and there was no space for them. And you know, when you have no... when a society doesn't create sufficient space for its citizens, then those citizens will find ways of expressing themselves and rioting is quite a common way for the excluded, for the outsider communities, to express themselves.

09:39

Samenua Sesher

Ferdinand's next radio series saw him travel to West Africa. And of course, he turned that into a book too - *Back to Africa: A Journey*, published in 1992.

09:51

Ferdinand Dennis

So, I put up a project idea again to the BBC, to send me around West Africa – six 45-minute documentaries, based on this trip around

Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, and each country looking at different themes. So, a sort of more elaborate version of *Behind the Front Lines*. And I don't think I was driven by a curiosity to meet new people; what I was driven by was a curiosity to explore certain themes as I travelled. So, the theme of repatriation: the nations created in Liberia and Sierra Leone by people returned, the descendants of slaves, of enslaved Africans, who had returned to Africa... what kind of nation did they create in that part of West Africa? And that was fascinating to me as a person of African descent, as a person who descended from those who had been through the Middle Passage - what was it like to return to Africa, to create these nations? Another example, in Senegal, I wanted to explore the idea of Négritude.

11:18

Samenua Sesher

Oh, that was a movement. There was a whole movement of Négritude. So yeah, that incorporated film, and yeah... Euzhan Palcy talks about Négritude.

11:30

Ferdinand Dennis

....and poetry, and so on. So, a hugely exciting moment in the evolution of black consciousness, really, people finding a voice. I think [it's] highly problematic, and I think I tried to point that out in the book, but nonetheless, an important moment, where people were trying to express, 'what did it mean?' Here they had been positioned

within European discourses as the binary opposite of whiteness, and they came up with this notion of Négritude, you know, I think it was Senghor that said: 'Intellect is Hellenic, whereas emotion is African.' You know, if anybody else had said that, if anybody said that today, they would be dismissed as an out-and-out racist, but in the 1930s and '40s it's considered to be quite a revolutionary idea that somehow emotivity was uniquely African and worthy of celebration, promotion, and so on and so forth.

So, Négritude in Senegal. In Ghana, I wanted to look at the idea of Pan-Africanism... Kwame Nkrumah's idea of Pan-Africanism, which attracted so many people from the Americas, you know, including W.E.B. Du Bois who, of course, died in Ghana. And then Nigeria - I can't remember what I wanted to do with Nigeria; for me it represented a return to Nigeria, I lived in the north for two years. So those... they had national unity... and in Africa, for me, this is absolutely fascinating... Here you have these nations created at the Berlin Conference in 1888, and then the Africans had the challenge, this huge challenge, of creating, of building these nations in the post-1950s. So that, for me, was worthy of exploration.

It was also about focus, you know. As I said, with *Behind the Front Lines* I didn't... I didn't want to travel through some nebulous notion of Britain called Black Britain, I had quite a specific focus. And so, the same with my West Africa journey, now, had these themes. Each country I landed in, I would talk to people around these... explore these different themes.

13:52

Samenua Sesher

And it's interesting because the style that you've adopted, it's sort of... not travelogue, but it is that sense of arriving, observing. And yes, it's subjective, because it's you who's doing the observing and you bring yourself to that, but historically, that style of writing has often been the white gaze, as they've travelled around the world. And, you know, we talk about the colonial gaze, we talk about us seeing ourselves through their eyes. And so, was it in your mind that you were in a way subverting that or was that just the way that you wanted to do it?

14:31

Ferdinand Dennis

My entire project... I have to say, my entire project as a writer, as somebody who had been educated in the British educational system from a very young age, and who became aware, at some point, aware of the paucity of material, the dearth of representations of the experiences of people like myself... and so my entire project was to make a contribution to correcting that absence, yeah? So saying, 'Here, this is how I see it, here it is from my pen, here are some works that will... let's see how they stand the test of time.' I think when I look around now at youngsters going through the educational system, I think they're very fortunate because there's an awful lot more, but you know, in the 1960s into the 1970s we really were in quite a... yeah, you were like, 'Where am I? Where am I? I'm just not there.' And you know, and so, I'm going to make it my life project to contribute to correcting that.

But how people of my generation got that history was through the music - through reggae music, and that kind of Rasta-influenced reggae music, you know. I can remember as a teenager, in the 1970s, being introduced to Count Ossie & The Mystic Revelation of Rastafari... the *Grounation* album, which talked about being carried away from Africa, and so on... that was how we got that history.

Now, I think any sensible education system, when you have a group of people who have experienced that in history, would include that on the curriculum, and that the whole culture would somehow or another reflect that, you know, the museums, the schools, and so on and so forth, and reflect it in a critical way - but instead, there was silence. And there were guys living in a place like Liverpool, for example, people live in a place like Liverpool where the city was steeped in the history of slave trade, similarly with Bristol. I regret that I didn't get to Glasgow, you know, a Scottish city with very strong ties to Jamaica, and to the Caribbean in general, but there are very few major seaports in this country, and in Europe, that don't have some kind of tie to the slave trade.

Now, my own view is that this has to be represented, this has to be reflected in public memory, and there is nothing wrong with that; to get youngsters critically reflecting on that past, to introduce that as early as possible, is, for me, the way to deal with that silence, to end silence.

17:34

Samenua Seshar

Alongside his two non-fiction works, Ferdinand wrote and published numerous short stories, and three novels: *Sleepless Summer*, *The Last Blues Dance*, and *Duppy Conqueror*.

So, I know you've done other novels, but your novel *Duppy Conqueror* has just been republished by Hope Road Publishing. For listeners who haven't read it: what is that novel about?

18:00

Ferdinand Dennis

Gosh, that's a big question. What's the novel about? That I'm not sure that I can tell you at this stage. The novel is about a man who is given the task of ridding his family of a curse by travelling back to Africa. And so, they're making a reconnection with Africa. Yeah, that's, I think that's about as much as I can tell you. So it's a sort of, you know, journey and return novel. He leaves the Caribbean, he arrives in Britain during the Second World War, he works here, and he gets involved in the Pan-African movement... and you know, Britain had been, from the beginning of the century, a sort of centre of anti-colonial agitation. So, he gets involved in that and becomes a nightclub owner. Eventually, you know, African independence comes and he goes to Africa, spends some time there and is then deported for challenging the regime. And he goes back to the Caribbean and has to confront the duppy that has been cursing his family. So, it's not, you know, it's not a realist novel, there are elements of magic realism. Does that answer your question?

19:16

Samenua Sesher

Yes, it absolutely does; it's a journey and return novel with magic realism. So, what was it like getting a publisher? Did it help that you were already a journalist, or...? What was it like actually getting your book published?

19:28

Ferdinand Dennis

Oh, yes. I mean, it helped an awful lot because it meant I had some sort of public... some kind of profile. You'll notice I started being published... so 1988, yes... and that was largely because of my association with the BBC, with Radio Four. You know, here's this huge outfit, and I've been given a sort of slot, a couple of hours each year. I wasn't a bad investment.

There was also a... to be said, part of this understanding the 1980s, when I started, you know, on the back of the 1981 riots, there was a report called the Scarman Report, and the Scarman Report made its recommendation: its strongest recommendation, clearest recommendation, was to create a black middle class. Yes, this was inclusion, Ultra HD inclusion. So if you were halfway educated, knocking around looking for work, and if you had, as I did - I'd studied up to Masters level - there were opportunities. And I was well placed to take advantage of those opportunities in relation to the media.

So, I got work in print journalism, and then, as I say, had what I thought was just a casual encounter with broadcasting which went on

for a couple more years. And, as I say, that public profile meant that I wasn't a bad investment from a publisher's point of view.

21:13

Samenua Sesher

When you think about the publishing industry, do you think that it has actually changed much? And do you see a mirror of the publishing industry in broadcasting? So, what you're saying, around the time of Scarman, there was a willingness - people were open in a way? Did they remain open? Or do you think things closed?

21:32

Ferdinand Dennis

Well, broadcasting was more open because the project of building this, creating this black middle class was state driven. It was the public sector that drove it. Publishing is a private concern, and they're always slow because, of course, what matters in publishing, or any private concern, is profit. As soon as the interest, the spotlight, is on black issues, racial issues... as soon as that spotlight dims, publishing will lose its interest. As long as, you know, kids are rioting on the streets, then publishers are going to be interested. But then the doors - as you imply - the doors close. So, I would say to any person wanting to enter publishing at the moment, that this is a good moment, because there's a great amount of interest post, you know, the Black Lives Matter protests.

22:39

Samenua Sesher

So get on it. So okay, so let's ask about... what your highlights? Because you've done lots of different things, you've done the fiction, the non-fiction and the journalism, you've done broadcasting, what would you... What are you most proud of?

22:52

Ferdinand Dennis

Gosh, I think that's quite difficult. And I think I'm proud of... that I've made a contribution, you know, that's what I'm proud of. That, you know, I look around at just the number of writers of African descent who are now producing works, and it seems like such a vibrant literary space out there for black writers and I think that's great - that people have come to recognise that, you know, in this age of visual culture and this age of, you know, the screen and so on, that the book matters, and the book has tremendous potential for self-expression.

23:36

Credit Music

'Outro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

23:47

Samenua Sesher

The brilliant Ferdinand Dennis was nominated for Respect Due by Gary Younge: author, broadcaster, journalist and sociology professor at the University of Manchester.

Respect Due is presented by me, Samenua Seshar, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at <https://museumofcolour.org.uk/>. The music you have heard in this series is from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Thank you for listening.