

The use of autobiography in fiction (4'20'')

Narrator

On this track you'll hear about how some authors use themselves in their fiction, often as a starting point for the creation of someone different, such as Monique Roffey's male character August, in her novel *Sun Dog*. The speakers are Abdulrazak Gurnah, Michèle Roberts, Monique Roffey and Alex Garland.

Abdulrazak Gurnah

I don't in any case expect that you can evade this, you know, that you can escape writing about your experiences, or if you do then in itself that becomes a kind of project. You can say, 'Well, I'm going to write about everything but I'm going to keep myself out of it.' Now what would be interesting then, if you were a reader, is to see where that suppressed self actually comes into the writing, however hard you suppress. But, you know, I don't feel like that at all and I know a lot of writers don't. There are a lot of writers who in fact quite happily write about themselves, Saul Bellow being

one, Philip Roth being another, who quite happily write about themselves. They make *themselves* the subject of their fiction. V.S. Naipaul is another one in recent times. But I still believe that in fact it is actually harder to keep the writer out of the writing than people imagine, at least the kind of fiction that I write and like to read.

Michèle Roberts

I think every novel has its root in the real world in that it presents me with a problem that I then try and solve. It might pose a question that the novel tries to solve. *The Mistressclass* was inspired by, I can't remember what now, it's so long ago, it's vanished into the unconscious. I think it was inspired by a real situation in my life in that I have sisters, I'm very interested in the relationships between sisters – it's a theme I return to. I am a twin sister. I'm fascinated by twins, by doubleness, by 'the other', the mirror image who's not the same as you. So there's an autobiographical element there. But I've found over and over again, every time, if you just write about yourself, you're too close to yourself, to your own stuff, you can't see it properly. So normally you end up repressing, writing quite clumpily and clumsily, and you need to open up to the world and throw your own stuff out into the world and find what T.S. Elliot called in this grandiose term – an objective correlative. For this new novel, I knew I wanted to write about sisters again, particularly sisters who were rivals. I found a pair of sisters – Emily Brontë and Charlotte Brontë – and I suddenly remembered that I had wanted to write about passionate, obsessive, unrequited love. Ha ha! Charlotte had exactly that experience with her tutor, Monsieur Héger in Brussels, so I was off. I'd found a subject in the world. But I think actually I'm writing a lot about my feelings about being a twin when I was little. It's not directly autobiographical, but there's an energy there.

Monique Roffey

Well, to be honest, August isn't that different in terms of his cultural background and his age. He's a sort of middle-class man of similar age to me when I was writing it. I think if he was a young boy who lived in China, though, I would have had to have made a much bigger creative leap. And again, I mean, it's a book of internals and internally I understood where August was coming from and what I was writing about, and that men and women do share the same emotional territory in many ways and so it wasn't a big leap in terms of craft – I didn't have to sort of think of any clever techniques in which to sort of put trousers on. August internally: I knew what he was about, really, so it was very easy to make the switch.

Alex Garland

In the case of *The Beach*, the protagonist, and I think there's, it's something that young writers or, maybe young is the wrong word, but first-time writers often do is that what they end up doing is they draw a lot on themselves to flesh out the character. So I did that a lot, I think, with the narrator of that book because you could do it and then you could drop in a few things that he would do that you wouldn't do, and suddenly you've got a fictional character who will take you in different directions.