

Libro.fm Podcast - Episode 46

Interview with Aaliyah Bilal

MUSIC:

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Audiobook Clip:

Sister Nora was first to arrive that Friday morning in preparation for the Jemma dinner. After leading Hanif, her adult son, to the boiler room, where he did janitorial work with Brother Akil, the grounds engineer and weekday muezzin, she sat upon completing the first of the day's tasks, reading any notes that had been left overnight in the suggestion box.

It was an idea the Shura board had come up with years earlier. So that the believers could feel they had a say in the workings of the kitchen, a small metal container had been hammered onto the back of the service door with a loose stack of white leaflets and a separate bin attached to a stout, yellow pencil that dangled from a string.

It was a system that had never fulfilled its intended purpose. The rare comments always involved complaints of matters unrelated, like the excessive [inaudible 00:01:13]. [inaudible 00:01:17] was in a constant state of disrepair, but reliable as usual, she carried out the chore in spite of precedent, always eager on the off chance a relevant comment had been received.

Standing on her tiptoes, sister Nora fumbled inside the box, where she found a single anonymous note written in a messy, cursive script. She walked into the kitchen, flipped a switch to illuminate several panels of lights that turned on one after the other like a trail of falling dominoes, then leaned against one of the stainless-steel prep tables to read what it said.

Karen Farmer:

Hello, everyone. Today we are here with Aaliyah Bilal, the author of Temple Folk, which was a National Book Award finalist in 2023. Welcome to the podcast, Aaliyah.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Thank you so much for having me.

Karen Farmer:

We would love it, to get started, if you could introduce yourself to our listeners, and just share a little bit more about all the things that you are doing in the writerly and the bookish world.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Oh, wonderful. Well, my name is Aaliyah Bilal, and I am a writer of fiction and creative nonfiction. I am a self-taught writer, and I started teaching myself how to write, and around 2013 is when I started taking it really seriously. I just went through, as one does, a really trying chapter of life in around 2019, 2020, and unfortunately, or fortunately, I should say, it's things like that that often spurn our creativity, and I just found myself in the midst of my suffering being very, very productive, and that's when most of the work that now comprises Temple Folk was written.

Again, I had no hopes of ever being published, but my sister who was taking care of me during this really terrible time found then an advert for this gentleman who was seeking unagented manuscripts, and I happened to be the first person he acquired. And so-

Karen Farmer:

Wow.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Yeah, it was... It's been an amazing, amazing journey, and kind of unusual, but not undoable, or not something that cannot be done.

Karen Farmer:

That's amazing.

Craig Silva:

You basically just answered my next question, though. We were going to say, "Wow. While researching for this episode, we read this amazing article in the New York Times. Said she didn't have an agent. Her debut is a National Book Awards finalist." And it said that you just opened a, like an open call for submissions to Simon & Schuster. I was curious, what was going through your mind when you did that? What did you expect to come of that? What has the journey been like since that?

Aaliyah Bilal:

I apologize. I expected absolutely nothing. All that I wanted was for my sister to get off of my back in case she followed up and said, "Did you submit?" And I wanted to tell her, "Yeah, I submitted. I'm never going to hear anything, but are you happy now?"

Craig Silva:

Wow, that... Total backfire.

Aaliyah Bilal:

That was all that I had hoped for, is just to get her off my back, but it turned into something.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. I think you could say it's turned into something for sure, yeah.

Karen Farmer:

It really did.

Craig Silva:

One of the New Yorker's best books of the year, et cetera. I'm struck by your comment around starting taking writing seriously in 2013, and here we are, only 10 years later, and you've had all this success. When you say you taught yourself writing, or started taking it seriously, what did that look like?

Aaliyah Bilal:

Well, I had just finished this master's degree. I went to an undergraduate institution where something like 80% of the graduates turn out to be professors. And so I sort of thought I was on the professorial track, and I finished a master's degree and realized I didn't quite have the right kind of mind for academic writing. And so I had just submitted my dissertation and was walking across the Thames, feeling like I just wasted all of this time in grad school. This is not my calling. As a midpoint on the Westminster Bridge, I received a story. It was like an instant download.

And so I ran home and I wrote this story in an hour. And it's a horrible story, I don't even remember what happens in the story. I know a couple little details, but it was enough to just say... Like that God voice, like, "Child, write. This is what you are supposed to do." I just sort of took it like a command, and I just started really just reading a lot of books, trying to figure out how the thought process worked. Because previously, I'd just been a reader, and it's a very different experience enjoying a book as a reader as opposed to enjoying a book as somebody that's dissecting what's happening on the page to try to recreate those kind of reactions in a reader yourself, and that took me several years.

Karen Farmer:

I love everything that you just said, because I'm dying to read this story now that you mentioned. If you ever decide to put it in the world, please let us know. I am a big time lover of short stories, and I wanted to ask you a little bit about genre and Temple Folk. I just think the vignettes that you've created work so well in this form, and I wanted to just hear a little bit more about that. What made you decide to write this as short stories versus a novel? How did it come to be?

Aaliyah Bilal:

Since I was a teenager, I've always preferred the short story form. I just love how efficient they are, I love how mathematical they are, and my mind just takes to the challenge in a different kind of way. I really, really like the challenge of a short story. And so I knew, as I was conceptualizing this collection, that it was going to be a short story collection.

Initially, I thought it was going to be vignettes, like each chapter... I'd have 30 chapters, and each chapter would be 300 to 500 words-

Karen Farmer:

Okay.

Aaliyah Bilal:

But that's more poetic than I felt capable of at the time, and so I just started reading a lot of Edward P. Jones and became addicted to his style, and I kind of just started taking on some of his traits as a writer, so they turned into more expansive stories.

Craig Silva:

Speaking of different genres, Kay and I both love Temple Folk, and we were excited to see that you have a new graphic memoir coming out called Cloud Country, about your experience as a black woman living in East Asia. Can you tell us more about what inspired you to write this book in this medium as compared to a novel or little vignettes? Why did you decide on the graphic novel style for this?

Aaliyah Bilal:

Well, first, let me just clarify that Cloud Country is kind of wrapped. I'm still in contact with the artist, and we're very good friends, but he had some other priorities in his life and he had to put it aside. And so as of yet, we have not resumed or completed that project, so it's kind of on hold. But I wanted to write it because I spent most of my adult life in China, and I had never seen a book about the black experience in China, and it just seemed like such a vital and important topic given the traffic between China and Africa.

This is a huge area of discourse, and when we think about China as an emerging global power, I think it's completely fair to have diverse voices commenting upon Chinese realities in the same way that China interjects itself in the affairs of African and Caribbean countries. And so I just gave myself permission to sort of think about the kinds of unusual experiences that I was having in that country, and that's how Cloud Country came about.

Craig Silva:

So, one, that's amazing, and I can't wait to read this, but two, I'm sad that it's kind of shelved at the moment. For listeners, if you go to cloudcountrythebook.com, chapter one is there. So, I read that, and I was like, "Oh, I can't wait for this to come out."

Aaliyah Bilal:

Yeah. I guess this is an exclusive for your podcast, but there will be... These China stories will be appearing in another form and-

Karen Farmer:

Oh, yeah.

Aaliyah Bilal:

... in a very thoughtful form. We won't lose hope, but hopefully this work is still forthcoming, but in a different sort of format.

Craig Silva:

Great.

Karen Farmer:

Awesome. Before we move into some sillier questions, I wanted to just circle back with a question on the event that you are at currently. In about a half hour or so, we're going to be talking to someone who I believe you know, named Carla, and I wanted to hear a little bit about the conversation that you two will be having at the event.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Yeah, I'm curious to see how it goes. I'm really excited. It'll be moderated by Natalie Green with the National Book Foundation, and I think it's just going to be a wide-ranging conversation about diverse

voices in American fiction and nonfiction, and just some of the challenges of writing in the age in which we are living, where there's so much pressure to be silent about these crucial events unfolding in our world. I plan to talk a little bit about courage, and the courage it takes to create, and also about the ways that a creative life is available to all of us. That there's no gatekeeper that can keep someone who's determined from achieving literary success. I think that's just a wonderful thing about the world of the creative arts, is it's really open to all of us.

Karen Farmer:

I'm feeling very inspired.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. You need courage and a pushy sister. Make sure you give that tidbit in your talk.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Absolutely.

Craig Silva:

Our last question we call Instagram Story Time, where we look at your Instagram and pick a picture, and then ask for a little bit more information about it. Kay chose this one, so why don't you tee it up?

Karen Farmer:

Yes, and you actually kind of alluded to this earlier, so I'm very excited. I found a gorgeous photo of you with Edward P. Jones. You're absolutely radiant. You look so happy in this moment. It seems like this is a big influence on your writing and inspiration. Oh, I think Craig is going to show the picture. Yes.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Oh, my gosh. Okay. Well, first of all, I adore this man. I could not love him more if he were my blood.

So, I first started reading Edward P. Jones as I was teaching myself how to write. The first story that I read of his was *The First Day*, and I read that story the way that you see someone you know you're going to spend the rest of your life with. My eyes crossed. I felt like Pepe Le Pew seeing a cute skunk, like, "Ooh. Ooh, la la. Oh, I want to kiss you. I want to hug you." I just fell in love with his writing, and ever since then, I've just been a devotee. You can't say his name and I'll just bow just to the sound of his name.

Okay, can I tell you a little bit of the story? There's a little bit of a story to this.

Karen Farmer:

Yes, definitely.

Aaliyah Bilal:

My sister sets me up, I get the book deal. After I get the offer of a deal, the editor told me that I needed to find an agent. And so I thought, "Who represents Ed Jones?" And so I looked up his agent, I sent him a message. Five minutes later, he writes me back, and it was very like, "Okay, sure. Send me your stuff." And the next day, he wrote me back. He's like, "Let me talk to you. I'd like to set up a Zoom." And so I basically got picked up by Ed Jones' agent.

Craig Silva:

Oh, my God.

Aaliyah Bilal:

And so after he blurbed the book, which apparently was his first blurb in 15 years, my agent, our shared agent, Eric Simonoff, has sort of been playing, like relaying messages between us. I told him earlier this year, I was like, "I would love to meet him, if that would ever be possible?" And so he connected us. And let me tell you, the meeting was the happiest of my life. He treated me to lunch, and I sat across from him. I was trying not to look crazy, because I was beaming the whole time.

Craig Silva:

Eyes crossing, Pepe Le Pew look.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Oh, you know, I was so tickled. We had the best conversation. I thought it was going to be the kind of thing where I was just blinking and staring at him, but we talked. He even hugged me at the end of it, so I felt like... I felt so... "Blessed" is the only word I can think of. I don't want to alienate you. If you don't like religious language, I apologize, but I can't think of another word to describe that feeling. It was just amazing.

Karen Farmer:

I love this so much. When people say that... What's that quote that's like, "Never meet your heroes." I'm like, "I disagree. Meet them. It's really beautiful sometimes."

Aaliyah Bilal:

Yeah. Yeah, he's a lovely-

Craig Silva:

That is amazing.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Thank you.

Craig Silva:

Yeah. So, our last thing before we'll let you go and get back to your festival there is, we always end the episode with asking for book recommendations. Either something you've read a long time ago, something you're reading now. It can be anything. So, what should we be listening to or reading right now?

Aaliyah Bilal:

I'm trying to think of something unusual or rare, like a book that people might not have heard of that I think would be... Well, let me recommend two. Two books that would be a great introduction to Islam in Africa would be a short story collection by a Ghanaian writer named Mohammed Naseehu Ali, and he published a book in the early 2000s, I think it was, if not the late... I think it was the early 2000s, called

The Prophet of Zongo Street, and it's based in a fictitious town in northern Ghana. They're beautifully told, very lighthearted stories depicting this mystical community of Muslims.

And then another book that I would recommend would be by a Sudanese author. It's a very short novel, I guess it qualifies as a novella, and it's called A Season of Migration to the North. It's another beautiful book that I think just exemplifies the breadth of the black Muslim experience.

Craig Silva:

Amazing.

Karen Farmer:

Thank you so much.

Craig Silva:

Yeah, thank you.

Karen Farmer:

Those are wonderful recommendations.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Thank you.

Craig Silva:

Thank you so much for your time.

Karen Farmer:

Yeah, this has been such a pleasure, Aaliyah. Thank you for letting us steal you away from margins for a bit.

Aaliyah Bilal:

Absolutely. It's been a pleasure.

MUSIC:

(instrumental music)