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No state, no monarchy. More books, more anarchy.

Benjamin Zephaniah

31st January 2022

It's been more than two years since I did my last blog here, if you can call this a blog, as I keep saying. Actually, I could never be a blogger. I just don't have the time. But the thing I like about writing here is that it's not an article for a newspaper, there's no publisher. It's just me writing, (every now and again), about things I'm doing, or things I'm not doing.

Recently I've been doing interviews where people have asked me to sum up the last two years. I can't, not in a quick sentence, or a sound bite. So much has happened.

Picture this. Please, try to picture this. A 15-year-old boy is taken off the streets by the police. He is taken to the police station, where he is not told what he's been arrested for. He is taken to a cell and beaten. Four big male officers racially abuse him. They laugh as they kick and punch him in the body. Not the face, (because that would be too easily seen), but to the body, especially the abdomen.

Then picture this. A 60-year-old man has taken his friend's little girl to the park, while they show potential house buyers around

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their house. As he is playing with the girl on the swings and roundabouts, the police arrive and although he is not arrested, he is questioned because the police think that a black man with the white child is suspicious.

Although those two incidences were more than 40 years apart, they both happened to me. When the first incident happened I really thought I was going to die. I can remember thinking that no one knew where I was, I can't defend myself, and this is what police do to people like me. I also remember crying 'I can't breathe', and whispering 'goodbye' to my mother, so convinced was I that I wasn't going to make it out alive.

The second incident happened a few years ago in Peterborough. When it happened, a few people said they thought it wasn't that bad because there are a lot of paedophiles around and the police are just being vigilant. I wanted to believe this, but I know of 3 white couples, who have adopted black children, and I've asked all of them if any of them have even been questioned for being in public with a black child. Not one of them said yes. Moreover, when I talked about this on a TV programme recently I got letters from 4 black people saying they had the same experience as me. One black woman from Gloucestershire said she was followed as she went around a shopping centre by an off-duty police officer.

Those two examples of racism I experienced above are just two of many, but what happened to me is nothing like what happened to Sarah Everard. As a black man I don't expect everyone to completely understand my experiences, but I need solidarity. I will never have the same experiences as women have as they walk the streets, or in the work place, or even online, but I can show my solidarity, and make sure that I am doing my best in playing no part in their persecution. On the contrary, it's just as important that I play my part in their liberation.

It is very difficult to write this, but I have to. Two sisters, Nicola Smallman and Bibaa Henry, go missing in Wembley. The police response is so bad that the sister's mother has to organise her own

emotional breakdown, tears and all, and you really could not see the join. That's a real actor I thought.

I've had a secret I've been keeping for months now, but at last I can talk about it, and this really is the first time I'm mentioning it in the public domain, but people, later this year I will be on the road with Peaky Blinders, the dance. Although the cast is different to the cast of the TV drama, (I don't think they are dancers), from time to time I will be appearing as the narrator with the dance. That really is all I can say right now.

Okay. I'm going now, but just before I go I want to link you with two charities that I give to. Please give a little if you can too. It's going to get rough in the next year or so, so if you can't afford to give yourself, please just be aware of them.

- Acorns Children Hospice
- Freedom Charity

Right. I must go kiss my mother.
Live good in your neighbourhood.

Both of my new books have won awards, and my TV show, so when it comes to receiving awards, I like them from my peers, or from people who really care about the issues. Every year people want to talk to me about that OBE thing. The project is now to offer more of them to minority groups to people seem to have a 'community' connect, but not too revolutionary. I recently saw a film of someone at the start of the first lockdown saying he planned to exercise in his back garden for charity and do a couple of high-profile deeds in order to get an OBE, and he did it. I have always said that it's up to the individual if they want to be impressed with these gongs, but they don't impress me, and I won't accept them on the behalf of someone, or a particular community. I still have no interest in receiving awards from the state or monarchy. I prefer debate and anarchy.

I can't end with paying tribute to my friend Helen McCrory who passed away last April. I first met her when we started filming season one of *Peaky Blinders*. I remember her introducing herself to me and speaking as if she knew everything about me. I was a little embarrassed because I did know much about her, but over the years we became friends. When making a film you really do spend most of the time waiting around for scenes to be set, and camera angles to be checked etc. At these times we either sit alone in our rooms, or we talk. I would spend a lot of time talking to Cillian Murphy about music, Paul Anderson about street life, Harry Kirton about veganism, Sophie Rundle about the arts, and when it came to Helen McCrory, we talked a lot about politics, and poetry. She was very passionate about both. She could also be every funny. But what amazed me about her more than anything was her acting ability. I will never forget one day when she was filming an extremely emotional scene where she had to get really worked up and tearful. She was in the middle of the scene when you director shouted, 'cut for lunch'. After lunch she came back and, in an instant, she was back where she left off. She went right back to the

search. Eventually the girls are found in a park. Both have been stabbed to death. Two police officers, who should have been helping the family, took so called 'selfies' of themselves with the bodies of the two murdered women. How low can you go? We should never compare people's suffering, but what we can do is compare media, and police responses. Cressida Dick, the then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, said when speaking about the Nicola Smallman and Bibaa Henry case, that she was 'disgusted with the allegations against the officers.' Note, she says the allegations, and not the act. Not even the photo. Of the vigil for Sarah Everard she said, 'If it had been legal, I'd have been there.' She should have been there if she really cared. The vigil for Sarah Everard had more legitimacy than any of Boris Johnson's parties.

I'm not saying anything about racism, sexism, misogamy and violence against women that I haven't said before, but let's get real. We have a female Home Secretary, and at the time we had a female head of the Metropolitan Police, and this is the best they can do to protect and defend women? This is the problem I have with the idea that diversity is the answer to the problems of inequality. If we fill government positions and the police with what we now call BAME, (I hate that term), people, what good is it if all they do is protect their jobs and the status quo? This is why I'm a revolutionary. The whole modius operandi of those institutions must change. That is if they are to exist at all.

Maybe I should lighten up a bit, so let me give a list of books I've been reading lately.

How Jesus became God by Bart D. Ehrman is brilliant. Bart Ehrman is a New Testament historian who really tells it as it is. He is one of my favourite authors of all time. His books are thoroughly researched, and although he says a lot about the bible that Christians don't want to hear, he's never condescending. He doesn't preach. He just does historic facts. Do check him out. While you're there, check out the great Francesca Stavrakopoulou. Her latest book is called, *God. An Anatomy*. If I say that this book is about

the physicality of god, or gods, it wouldn't do the book justice. It's much more than that, and I don't feel qualified to review it in any great detail. But if you are interested in the way people have imagined their gods over the years, read this. Francesca also approaches her subject as a historian but unlike Bart Ehrman she does not stick strictly to the bible or Christianity.

I have been re-reading books that I read years ago, these include, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* by Walter Rodney. This was first published in 1972, but after reading it again I'm amazed at how relevant it still is. Especially for people who cannot understand why certain parts of the world produce all the things the rich world loves, but the people would produce the sparkly, expensive things are so poor.

The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. B Bois is one of the most poetic histories of black people ever written. Just read it. I've also re-read *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, and *Ain't I a Woman*, by the great Bell Hooks, who we recently lost.

I have a fascination with witches and their persecution. If you do then *Witch Hunt* by Kristen J. Sollee is a good read. It doesn't really deal with Asia or Africa, which I found a bit odd, because there are places all over the world where women, (and men sometimes), are killed for being suspected of being witches. This is a journey around European and North American, histories and percussion of 'witches.' It's still good though.

My recent publications have been *Windrush Child*, a novel for young readers, *Nature Trail*, a picture book for children, and in April of this year my new children's book, *We Sailed Across the Sea*, will be published. This book is about Mona Baptiste. A woman who came to Britain on the Empire Windrush, not to work in factories, not to work on the buses, not even to work in the NHS, but to be a singer. It is a fascinating story, and one I really want children to know about.

In between lockdowns I also toured with my band. Which was liberating to say the least. I made a TV programme for BT sports

about Caribbean football players and their experiences of playing in England.

What has given me most joy recently is seeing the publications of books by ex-students of mine. *Careless* by Kirsty Cape, done really well. It's the story of a young girl's pregnancy, and all she has to deal with in a working-class suburb.

The Good, The Bad, and The Poet, is a collection of great poems by Gabby Sambuccetti. Gabby now lives in Argentina.

His Royal Hopeless by Chloe Perrin is a really funny story which has serious underlying questions about it.

Last, but by no means least is *Amok* by Anna Tan. A tale of prophets, the supernatural, and royal power struggles. All of these students fill me with pride.

It is wonderful to see ex-students go on to publication, and there have also been students that have gone on to make a name for themselves in performing poetry. Which lead me smoothly onto more joy.

Another source of joy for me has been presenting *Life and Rhymes on Sky Arts*. Strange really. A few years ago, I would never work with Sky. In fact, I once refused all the money they could throw at me when they wanted me to work with them, but I just could not work under Rupert Murdoch. But he's gone, and things have changed. Anyway, the first season on *Life and Rhymes* was broadcast on Sky Arts at just the right time in my opinion. I think the country, nay, the world, needed to hear the poetic voices of all these people that had so much to say about lockdown, black lives that matter, violence against women, young carers, police brutality, sexuality, over worked NHS workers, body dysmorphia, the mental health of us all, and everything else. It was really great to give voice to so many people, so great that we won the BAFTA. I say that as someone who is not obsessed with winning awards, but I do think it acknowledges the power of what we did during that first lockdown.