

Date: 19th November 2019  
Author/Interview subject: The Boxer, by Nikesh Shukla  
Interviewed by: Janice Forsyth  
Other speakers: Audience (Aud), Boy in audience (Boy), Girl in audience (Girl)

JF: Hello everybody, I'm Janice Forsyth. A huge, warm welcome to Authors Live. Thank you so much for joining us, you are in for a treat, though. And with us today, we have pupils from Smithycroft Secondary School in Glasgow. They're taking part here in Book Week Scotland, which I'm sure you know about, there are activities all over the country. It's our national celebration of reading and writing. They're a lovely bunch, don't take my word for it. Why don't you, wherever you're watching, give them a wave, and they'll wave back to you, won't you, Smithycroft? Go on, give them a wave. Yeah. Fantastic, new friends, made across the airwaves, just because of Authors Live, I love it. We're all very excited this morning, we've got a really brilliant special guest for you today. He's Nikesh Shukla, I'm sure you're familiar with his work. He's done all sorts of stuff, as well as being a writer, and a screenwriter. For example, he's presented his own podcast, and he also edited The Good Immigrant. Again, you might know about this, it's a collection of essays by writers of colour, and it was a great big success.

Well today, he's here to talk to us about his young adult novel, The Boxer, which looks at really interesting, quite tough subjects – racism, the far-right, and the power of sport to help us with our mental health. And just to let you know in advance, Nikesh will be telling us about the book, and also, he'll be doing a couple of readings, including an extract from The Boxer, which describes a violent attack. And as we'll find out, that's a really crucial part of the story. We love to hear from you during Authors Live, it's all about your response. So if you have any questions, you can use the Twitter hashtag, #bbcauthorlive. Okay, that's really important, Twitter hashtag, #bbcauthorlive. And I'm sure during the course of listening to Nikesh, you'll come up with some cracking questions, and I'll try to ask him as many of your questions as possible. But right now, I'll be quiet, because we don't want to waste any more time, you want to hear from the

main man. So here in the studio, and out there, let's have a huge riotous round of applause, cheers possibly, a big warm welcome, to Nikesh Shukla.

Aud: [Applause].

NS: How's it going?

Aud: Good.

NS: Good. Okay, so I'm going to start with a short reading from *The Boxer*, just to kind of set it up for you. It's about a young man called Sunny, he's 17 years old, he's starting to make decisions about who he wants to be in his life, like what sort of life he wants to lead. He's just moved from London to Bristol, so he's moved from everything he knows, to a brand new city, so he's feeling quite isolated. And one night, he is brutally attacked because of the colour of his skin, at a train station, and it changes the course of his life. And he goes from being someone who wants to work out who he is going to be, into becoming, essentially, just, the colour of his skin. And that destroys him, it sends him into a huge amount of anxiety and depression. And to combat that anxiety and depression, he takes up boxing, he is *The Boxer*, of the title. And the book is told over the ten rounds of his first ever boxing match, where he is battling against, his now ex-best friend, Keir. And over the course of the novel, as the match flashes back in time, you start to realise that Keir has started to become radicalised by the far-right. And so I'm going to read right from the start, and then I'm going to tell you a bit about how the book came together, because I think it's quite an interesting story.

Okay, so, round one. The bell rings and my paws are up, I'm on my toes, dancing under the lights, ball of foot to ball of foot, edging backwards, letting him come to me. I've seen him training, heck, I've even sparred with him a bit, so I know he's always on the front foot, no defence. So I figure I just have to let him come, absorb what blows I can, and concentrate on the counter-punch. Here we are, in front of our witnesses, a long way from the gym, and the road, and the shadow-boxing in front of the full-length mirror. Under these lights, it's just Keir and me. Neither of us thought it would come to this. I wipe sweat off my forehead with both my gloves, and bang them together, bearing my teeth at my opponent. My mouthguard tastes stale and salty, it feels alien in my mouth. He winks at me as he comes closer, moving with confidence. It feels like an age ago that Shobu clasped my hands together, winked and told me, I could do this.

It's been less than ten minutes in reality, but all time has slowed down. The lights whirring around us are so bright that I squint. I don't notice Keir stepping in quickly and snapping a jab to my face. I'm turning away as fast as I can so I can

manage to dodge the majority of the blows, but he's on my now, his gloves touch mine, and he's driving his entire body into me, pushing me back towards the ropes. I can hear Shobu screaming at me to duck and weave, keep moving. And I can hear the crowd crying out for Keir. It's my proper match, and I know he's much more experienced than me. I just have to summon up the confidence from somewhere. And Shobu shouts, Sunny, just keep moving, stop waiting for it to happen. I flick my eyes back towards her, in my corner. My hesitation costs me, as Keir lands across on my cheek, knocking me off balance. It's my fault.

So, that's the opening of the book. I'll tell you a little bit about how it came together. Because, often, one of the questions I get asked a lot is, where do your ideas come from, where do your novels start? And more often than not, novels for me start from a very real place. Something will happen in my life, or in the lives of people around me. And my novelist brain will kick in, and I'll always think, I wonder what would have happened if. And so often, my novels are me asking questions of the world, and trying to figure out the answers. So, the thing that happened to me that made me think, I wonder what would have happened if. I just want you to cast your minds back to the end, around this time, three years ago, 2016. So I'd just put out a book called, *The Good Immigrant*, it came out in 2016. And it was a huge success. And the really exciting thing about putting out a book about the lives of immigrants in Britain was, we got to carve out some space for people from those backgrounds to actually have those conversations, rather than just press and politicians talking about what it was to be an immigrant in this country.

And I got to tour the country, so I got to take a lot of trains, from Bristol where I live, to like, to Edinburgh, to Manchester, to Cardiff, to Brighton, to London. And I spent a lot of time on trains, and I would spend a lot of time coming home on trains, quite late at night. So, trains kind of became, like my office, my safe space, my sanctuary, my mode of transportation. And there was one night, so I'd had these sweatshirts made up that said, *The Good Immigrant*, on them, okay. And there was one night where I was coming back from London, at 11.30pm, so the last train from London to Bristol, it ends up in Swansea. And it hits Bristol at about 1.30 in the morning. And I needed to stay awake, 'cause I didn't want to end up in Swansea, because then it's very hard to get back from Swansea at two in the morning. So I'm wearing my *Good Immigrant* jumper. And I'm watching a really rubbish action film on my laptop, just to kind of stay awake.

And at Reading, the train empties out, and the carriage is suddenly very empty. Which is weird because I notice that I was the only one on the carriage. And that's quite an unusual thing at that time. So I'm watching my film, and I'm the

only one in the carriage. And then, not long after we leave Reading, I suddenly feel this presence near me. Now, I don't know if you've ever been in a room where you think you're the only one in the room, and then you suddenly realise there's someone else there, and you feel that, oh, that shiver down your spine, it's horrible, isn't it, to like, suddenly realise you're not alone. I suddenly realised that there were three men, one sitting right in front of me, one sitting next to me, one sitting behind me, in this empty carriage. They could have sat anywhere else, but they choose to sit next to me. And they're all shout-talking at each other, and they're all swigging from their beer cans.

And I feel quite intimidated, because they're just like, they've taken my space. This is my space, this is my part of the train, you've got the rest of this carriage, why have you taken my space. So I'm a little shook, right. So I just mute the film, just for a second, just to kind of, just to see what they're talking, what they're shouting about. And I mute the film for a second, and I realise that they're talking about me. Not only are they talking about me, but they're talking about wanting to beat me up. Not only are they talking about me, and not only are they talking about wanting to beat me up, but they're talking about wanting to beat me up because they hate what my jumper says – The Good Immigrant. And not only are they talking about me, and wanting to beat me up, and not liking what my jumper says, they're talking about how I am brown-skinned, and therefore I don't deserve to be so proud. Whoa, why is he so proud, how dare he, how dare he wear such a jumper, how dare he, like, we need to teach him a lesson, we need to teach him a lesson.

And in this moment, like, I don't know what you guys would have done, I don't know what you would have done out there. Like, I'm not like level six, Krav Maga, Karate, Kung Fu, self-defence, I don't know how to fight. Like, the only fights, up until this point, the only fights I've ever been in, in my life, it would be unfair to call them fights, they were pretty one-sided. But also, all I wanted to do in this moment was just stand up, walk away, change carriages. That's all, find another carriage where there are people, that's all I need to do, stand up and walk away, stand up and walk away. Part of me starts thinking, you shouldn't have worn this jumper. Which is a problematic thing to think, right, because why should I have to change my behaviour in order to accommodate other people. If you start policing what people wear, policing what you wear in order to be accommodating to other people, you're sort of policing your own identity. But all I need to do is stand up and walk away, but I can't do it, I just, I freeze. So like, I can feel myself, like, shrinking, like, they're taking up more and more of my space, and I'm like, pressing my cheek into the window of the, what's it called, the train.

And I'm like, pressing the back of my back, and the back of my head into the seat. I'm trying to make myself as small as possible, I'm trying to disappear into the seat, because I don't want to be here. I don't want for them to suddenly attack me, I just want them to not see me anymore. Because nothing in me will just stand up and walk away, that's all I need to do, just stand up and walk away, but I can't do it. And, you know what, the thing that saves me is, there's CCTV on the carriage. And so, they decide, allow it, leave this guy, so they got off at the next stop, and they go about their day. Now, I guarantee you, they forgot about that conversation, five seconds after it happened. But for me, it's now in my head. And the entire time, I'm thinking, that was my fault, I could have dealt with that better, that was my fault. It's my fault for being racially abused, it was my fault. Now, also, nothing happened, I didn't get beaten up, I didn't get threatened, I just heard three people very casually talking about beating me up, so actually there shouldn't be much of a problem, right?

And, you know, when I tell people about this incident later, they're just like, oh they're just a bunch of idiots, it's just an isolated, what, it doesn't matter, nothing happened to you, you're fine, you're fine. And the thing that happens, when people tell you that you're fine, in these moments, is, they're ultimately telling you, it doesn't matter. Now, it does matter, if people are trying to make you feel bad because of the colour your skin, right? And it does matter that they make you feel like it's your fault, and it does matter that the people around you are like, forget about it, it doesn't matter. All of these things do matter. And all of this stuff is staying with me. So I'm like, and now, I still have to get trains for a living, like, as part of my job. And now, like, the safe space of the train has been taken away from me. Like, what if I take another train and I see those guys again, and like, I suddenly, like, freeze, again. I don't know what to do. And at the same time, so I'm walking around, the next few days, just thinking about all this stuff, and feeling, like, horrible because of what happened. And just, I don't know what to do, and it's just, it's in my brain

And let me tell you about another incident that is in my brain, okay. So when I was like 14 years old, I was cycling into town to buy some records. And a car came along, and just knocked the front of my bike, and I fell off my bike, and I fell to the ground. And the driver got out the car, ran round to check that his car was okay, or her car was okay, and they screamed at me, and they called me, a racist word. I'm not going to say the racist word, but they called me a racist word. And then they got back in their car and they drove off. They probably wouldn't have given it another thought. But that word stayed with me. Because I went from being someone who was trying to like forge my own identity, I'd just gone out to buy Radiohead records, because I was making a statement that I was a

Radiohead fan. And you know, when you're that age, like, all these things are important. And then I went from being a Radiohead fan, to being the P word. And that was horrendous for me, like, it was so horrendous.

And like, I just stopped going out. Suddenly, my streets didn't feel safe anymore, my streets didn't feel like they belonged to me anymore. I felt like the worst possible stereotype of this thing, and it messed with my mental health. Like, I stopped going out, as a teenager. And so when people say, oh it was just an idiot, it's just an isolated incident, I always think about that one moment, and how that one moment made me stop going out as a teenager. Like, as a teenager, I should have been going out all the time, and like, hanging out with my friends, and doing stuff, but I just didn't. Because something in me said, outside is where the scary people are. So when I think about this idea of, what happened to me on the train, and it being my fault, and how I didn't take up space, like, I think about those two moments, a lot. And you know, my editor was like, what's your next book going to be about?

And at the time I was like, I think I want to write something about the trauma of racist incidents, because I want people to understand what it's like to be in those moments, how it feels. Like, I want those of us who have had those moments, I want them to read a book and feel like a mirror is being held up to them, so that they can go, you know what, it's not my fault. They feel seen, and they feel heard, and they feel respected. And I want people who would minimise these things to read it and go, oh my god, I will never be like that person again. But I didn't know what I was going to do with any of this stuff, I just knew that, thematically, that's roughly what I wanted to do. And, but at the same time, I wanted to not be scared of trains, I didn't want to do this, I wanted to do this. I wanted to take my space back. Because if I could take my space back, then maybe next time something like that happened, I'd just, I'd have the confidence to just stand up and walk away.

And I was talking to a friend about all of this, and they suggested I take up boxing, and I was like, why boxing? And they were like, have you looked at your frame, you're probably a better boxer, than like, something that requires, someone whos a bit more lithe. And I was like, okay. And also, they were like, the thing about boxing is like, it's all about the training, it's all about training your mind as well as your body, and like, it'll give you real confidence, it'll help you take up space. Because boxing is so much about self-defence, as it is about being on the offence. It's also about learning what space you occupy, and what space to not occupy. And also, it's like, because the training of it is so immersive, it will really help with you kind of getting out of this funk. And they told



me that they had taken up boxing as a way of dealing with some grief. So they'd had a parent die quite suddenly, and they felt so angry at what had happened, at this sort of tragedy, that actually the boxing helped them deal with that anger.

And that was an interesting thing for me, because I just thought, you know what, I'm really angry. And the thing that people keep saying to me, when they're like, oh forget about it, it's just a bunch of idiots, is they're telling me, you're not allowed to be angry about this. I'm not allowed to be angry about this. And I was angry, I was so angry about what had happened on that train, I was so angry about what happened when I got knocked off my bike. I'm so angry when I read the news, I'm so angry when I read certain newspaper columnists, and the language they use. And I'm angry about all of this stuff, and I'm not allowed to be. And so, I went down to a boxing gym, and I got as far as the front door, and I just left, I was like, this isn't for me, I didn't go in. And as I was walking away, I was like, that was pretty stupid, man, like, you should have gone in, like, why dismiss this chance.

And I told my friend that I'd done that, and they were like, you know what, it's not the environment you think it is. Because the way I'd assumed a boxing gym was, I just assumed that every boxing gym was like the set of Rocky, it would be a bunch of meathead men, like, sweating, and like, being toxic-ly masculine, and just like, it just didn't seem like a place I wanted to be in. And my friend was like, it's actually the most diverse place you could go into, and it's like a community, it's like another family. So I went back the next day, and I was walking through the door, a trainer noticed me, and the trainer was like, you came here yesterday, didn't you, and I said, yeah. And they said, you didn't come in, did you, and I said, no. And they said, it doesn't matter, you're here now, come in, and they invited me into the space. And that invitation was so important. Because they led me into this space, they introduced me to all of the people, showed me all of the equipment. Told me what happened, like, asked me what I wanted to get out of being there. And I told them what had happened to me on the train, and they completely understood. They were the first person who weren't like, oh it's just a bunch of idiots, they were like, this is a good place to help you deal with all those things.

And so, I started learning to box, and you know what, I loved it. I really loved it. I really loved going from this, like, to slowly taking up more and more space. And, but I still didn't know what my book was going to be about. And then, because I was boxing, and like, occasionally, when you're a writer who sort of does something that's not writing, you will have random conversations with people at the BBC. And I had this random conversation with this person who makes radio

programmes for BBC Radio 4, a lovely producer called Anne-Marie Bullock. And I told her I'd taken up boxing, and she was like, do you want to come on Radio 4 and do a show about boxing, and I was like, I don't know anything about boxing, I've been doing it for, like, three months. And she was like, no, no, that's the point of the programme, you get to, like, do an investigation into what boxing is, and how it can fit into your life. And so I did this show, and I did three interviews over the course of the show.

So I did an interview with a writer called Hayley Campbell, who had taken up boxing as a way of dealing with, like, as a way of dealing with grief. And she'd told me about how she had used boxing as a way of, like, helping her with depression and anxiety, and I thought that was really interesting. I did a talk with an ex-professional boxer called Kieran Farrell, who, he was going to be massive, he was going to be a huge, known boxer. But then, he suffered, like a career-ending injury, because he, like, he mis-trained, he dehydrated himself to drop weight size, and then he ended up having too many knocks to the brain, and he had a blood clot, which meant he wasn't allowed to box again. But instead of walking away from boxing, he just set up, like, he became a boxing promoter for young people in Manchester, and did, like, lots of focus on, like, training young boxers properly. And he taught me about the mentality of the fighter, and how it's all about, you know, battling yourself, and he explained to me, like, the importance of doing things like shadow-boxing.

Because, like, when you're learning to box, the first thing you have to do after you skip, and you warm up, is you have to stand in front of the mirror, and you have to, like, box in front of a mirror. And it's so self-conscious, to like, stand in front of a mirror and do that. But the reason he says you do that is because the first person you need to fight is yourself. You need to get out of yourself, and that helps you get out of yourself. And I thought, if I can get out of myself, then maybe I can get these men out of myself, I can get them out of my head. And then, the third person I spoke to was, this academic had done this study, like, can boxing teach young men respect and discipline. And she was amazing, she basically really challenged me on why I was learning boxing. She was like, why are you learning to box, why are you, like, consenting to punch people, and be punched, that's kind of weird, why don't you learn, like, self-defence, why don't you learn non-violent communication, why don't you learn conflict resolution? And she really challenged me.

And I said, I think it's because I'm angry, and it's a good way to deal with anger, and she was like, okay, I understand that. And she was the second person who said, who basically acted like what had happened to me, she wasn't going to



minimise it in any way, and that was really important to me. And so, suddenly, I knew what this book was going to be about. Because, through boxing, I was becoming more confident, I was taking up more space. I was getting these men out of my head. But also, because I'd learned all of this stuff about the different facets of boxing, I suddenly understood that a really amazing way to write a novel about a young man dealing with the trauma of an anxiety and depression that comes with a racist attack, is someone who takes up boxing.

And so that's pretty much how the book came together. So the book, basically, to go back to that first thing I said, about how novels come together, often it's a novelist saying, I wonder what would have happened if. So this novel is me basically going, I wonder what would have happened if I had been beaten up that day. And so, I've gone down the rabbit hole of, what would have happened if I'd been beaten up that day. So, about six months after I've taken up boxing, I'm in a petrol station, wearing the same jumper, walking through the petrol station. And this guy is walking past me, and he says, eugh, take that off, that jumper is disgusting, how dare you, take it off now. And instead of running away, or like, shrinking, or disappearing into the crisps, I was like this, what did you say? And we had a conversation about what he had said about my jumper. And at the end, we agreed to disagree, but I got him to say that maybe trying to make me feel bad in the middle of a petrol station in Swindon, was probably not a nice thing to do to a stranger.

And he walked away, and I walked away. And I noticed that, as I walked away, I had taken up the space that I'd wanted to take up beforehand. And boxing had given me that. But boxing hadn't just given me that, writing this book had given me that. Because, through the writing of this book, I'd got to basically write down exactly how I felt in that moment, exactly how I felt after that moment, and exactly how I dealt with it. And that's the power of writing for me. Like, sometimes, writing can just help me try and figure stuff out, or it can help me ask questions of the world, and answer them in a myriad of ways. I can look at something from 360 degrees, and try and understand it. And so, the combination of writing this book, and training to box, it helped me to get over these incidents that had happened. And that was really, really powerful. And I think a lot about who this book is for. And as I said before, I want this, I wrote this book because I want young people who have been through similar incidents, to feel seen. Like I'm saying to them, I see you, I hear you, I feel you, I understand you, it's not your fault.

Because when these things happen, it's not your fault. It's not your fault, you should never be judged, or mistreated, because of the colour of your skin. I

mean, you can be judged or mistreated because of your terrible personality, that's by the by. I'm joking. But the main thing is, there aren't books, that many books out there, that would be like a mirror to those of you who have been through these incidents. And those of you who, might have friends who have been through these sorts of things. So I mean, I wrote this book for you as well, because I want you to understand what's happening to your friend. Because at the same time as you kind of understanding that, yeah, racism is bad, and we shouldn't stand for these things, they might need more support than just you going, oh yeah, what a bunch of idiots.

So I hope this book resonates with some of you, and those of you watching at home. I hope the theme, like, I didn't want to basically soft sell the themes. So I'm going to finish with an extract from the book, that is basically what happens to Sunny on that train platform. I just want you to, I'm just going to warn you that there is some violence in here, but I think, you know, after the talk we've had, I feel like we can all deal with it, right? Okay.

The platform was empty, so I sat down on a bench, all the way up one end to wait. That way, I wouldn't have long to walk to get out of the station when I got off. I'd just missed a train, its lights glowed with the diminishing yellow as it disappeared in the direction of home. My brain was swimming with ways to attack my coursework. My feet felt like they'd been glued to my socks and trainers all day. All I wanted to do was to take them off and rub my toes into the carpet before lying down and going to sleep. My stomach rumbled. I took a samosa out of my bag and bit into it. It had gone soggy. I heard some loud chatter to my left and stole a look. I didn't want to make eye contact with anyone, I didn't know this area too well, and I didn't know who lived here. Three guys were stumbling down the platform, clutching beer cans, and yelling at each other at the top of their voices. I put my hood up and tried to make myself as small as possible. I carried on eating.

"Here, I'm starving, can I have a bite". I looked up to see one of the men standing in front of me, pointing at my samosa. "What is that, anyway". So I was like, "Curried, innit", to one of his friends sitting down on the bench next to me. I felt the bench shudder for just a second with the impact of him. I kept my eyes on my samosa, not looking up. I shifted in my seat, trying to make myself disappear. I stared at the half a samosa in my hand. I wanted to stand up and walk to the other end of the platform, that's all I needed to do. Stand up, walk down the platform, stand up, just stand up, make your legs work, why won't my legs work, stand up, walk away. But I couldn't move. I remained as quiet, and as still as I could, I even held my breath. My stubble grazed my hood, the noise felt

so loud. “Oi, I’m talking to you”, the man in front of me said, again. I could feel the third friend pacing behind me, it made my neck itchy, knowing he was there and I couldn’t see his face, just him breathing, and crushing a beer can incessantly.

“Give us a bite of your thing, what is it, a mimosa?”. His mate cracked up. The one behind me was creasing so much, he banged my shoulder hard as he laughed. I flinched, samosa, you idiot. “Can you even talk English”, he asked again, he stopped laughing. “I want a bite, now, I’m hungry”. I didn’t reply. I didn’t know what to do. Without thinking, I took a bit of the samosa. He smacked at my mouth. I bit down on my tongue, and my cheek stung with the smack, I cried out in pain. I bent forward, dropping the samosa, and cupping my mouth. I’d never been hit before. I peered up at him, he looked angry. Stand up, walk away, please just stand up, please, I thought. I whimpered. “I said, I want a bite”. Something landed hard on my back, it felt like an entire body. It was so heavy, it jerked me forward. My nose whacked into my knee, and I felt, I had the wind knocked out of me, as I slumped off the bench. It was the man behind me, he’d jumped me.

I fell into the man in front, who kicked me away. “Leave him”, I heard one of them say, probably the one who’d been sitting on the bench. “CCTV, innit. This stupid immigrant needs to get a beating. When the vans come to take him home, there won’t be much left of him”. “Forget it”, the other man said. I wish I’d looked harder, now, I wish I’d seen their faces for more than a second. But then I remembered, I wanted my body to be as small as possible, and curled into a ball. The first kick that landed crunched at my ribs, it was like running into a wall. The second, in my side, knocked all of the air out of me. I forgot to breathe, everything was burning. I wanted to die just there and then, just so it would end. I didn’t think it would get much worse, until the main guy started kicking me in my stomach, with the full force of a Timberland book cracking everything inside me. I was crying through it all, I’d never been in so much pain. It was my fault.

Thank you.

Aud: [Applause].

JF: Wow. Wow, that was quite something. Thank you so much, Nikesh. I mean, everything you talked about there was so powerful, and to finish with that reading. I mean, sorry, it packs a punch. I had to say it, but it’s true. And I think, a heck of a lot for people to think about. I was looking at our audience, and they were really sort of hanging onto every word, so much to think about there. And wherever you are watching, make sure you get your questions in, if you’ve got a

question for Nikesh, that maybe you'd thought of before we went on air, or you are prompted by something that Nikesh has talked about. Get them in as fast as you can using the hashtag, #bbcauthorlive. We have some in, already. But we also have our audience here, from Smithycroft Secondary School, in Glasgow. And 'we've got some questions for you right here, from the live audience. So we're going to go to our front row here, first of all, and to Aiden. Hi, Aiden, what's your question?

Boy: When you're writing, do you start with an issue that you want to write about, or do you just start off with characters?

NS: That's a really good question. I think I start with the central question that I want to ask, the central question that I want to explore. So with this book it was, how do you overcome the trauma of a racist attack, can it happen through sport. And so once I had that, I started thinking about, once I have the question, then I have to start thinking about the character. Because everything that happens in the novel, anything can happen in a novel. Like a meteor could be hurtling towards Earth, or it could be two people sitting in a coffee shop talking about their problems. Or it could be a kid in his first ever boxing match, anything can happen. But as long as the character, and the central question that I'm asking, are kind of talking to each other, that's the most important thing. So once I know what the theme is, then I can work out who the characters are. So that's often where I start.

JF: Great question, thank you very much, Aiden. And I guess, fundamentally, you know, you can start from an issue, as you say, but you've got to think about the characters. It's got to be a good story, a page-turning story, doesn't it?

NS: Yeah, exactly. And often I think, that's probably why I started writing YA, because YA has given me the...oh, young adult.

JF: Yeah, young adult.

NS: Which, fiction has given me the freedom to, you know, my first young adult fiction was a thriller, a genre thriller. And I'd never considered writing a thriller before until, you know, I was starting again as a YA author, and I thought, I could write a thriller. And that's, you know, it's exciting to have that freedom.

JF: Yeah, the freedom is really important. Great, thank you. And now we have a question from Chanelle, thank you.

Girl: Can you tell us about the Good Immigrant, and where the idea came from to make it happen?

NS: Yeah, sure. So it came from a bunch of different places. So the first place it started was, I wanted to do a project that brought more British writers of colour to publishing, and sort of show how amazing and talented British writers of colour were. Because, you know, back, three, four, five, six years ago, they just weren't getting published. And I thought, well I could do something positive. But, you know, usually, my go-to in these instances is just to whine on Twitter, but I wanted to do something positive for a change. And so I thought, maybe I could do an anthology, and so we did, that's where, that's initially where it came from. But the thing about the anthology was, it came out just after Brexit. And so, by then, because of Brexit, for better or for worse, the conversations around, about immigration, had sort of changed. And this book, basically, arrived, and gave 21 different voices from immigrant backgrounds. And a chance to humanise their stories.

JF: Thank you very much. And can I just ask you, what was the response like, you know, when you did that? It must've taken a wee while to sort of get it out there, that you were inviting folk to get in touch. I don't know if it was that random, or if you already had a kind of brilliant hitlist that you thought, these people should reach a wider audience. What was the process like?

NS: I just, there wasn't really a process for the first one. For the American edition, we were much more targeted, because now, we had something to kind of, measure up against. The first one, I just knew that, I knew a lot of writers, and a lot of writers who wrote brilliant essays online, or brilliant on Twitter, or wrote for newspapers. But there's just something about the permanence of a book.

JF: Sure.

NS: And I wanted to see more of them have the experience of the permanence of a book. And so I asked loads of people, and out of all of the people I asked, those 21 were the ones who turned in a first draft, and then got the final draft to us before we had to go to print.

JF: Brilliant. That's the thing, writing is fine, but its graft, as well, you have to do it, and you have to meet the deadlines.

NS: Yeah, yeah.

JF: And it's also, just picking up on what you talked about there, with the subject matter of *The Boxer*, where a lot of it is to do with building up, as you say so brilliantly, the way you stand there, it's like, I'm owning the space, and I'm taking up more space, I'm not shrinking. It's all to do with confidence. And I presume it's the same with, as you say, the permanence of a book, for those writers who

maybe didn't have that before. That must be a huge confidence boost, and part of this book, the Good Immigrant.

NS: Yeah, definitely. And, you know, the cruelty of writing for online is, for a week, everyone's talking about this brilliant article you've written, and next week there'll be another one, and another one, and another one. And it just means that you have to keep coming up with new ideas, to be the one that, the essay that everyone's talking about that week. And that's quite hard for writers, it's hard, I think, for writers, then, to think about doing something that lasts, rather than just going, well what's going to make me hot this week.

JF: Sure. No, it's so interesting, particularly in Book Week Scotland, because it's that whole thing of, so much of what we do is online, but actually, books are important for many reasons. And that's one that I hadn't thought of so much, so thank you for that. We have some more questions. We, now, are going to hear from Megan. Hi, Megan, what's your question for Nikesh?

Girl: Which writers do you admire the most?

NS: Which writers do I admire the most? Oh god, that's so...how long have we got, 'cause I've got a very long list. I really love writers like Zadie Smith, and Hanif Kureishi, because they came along at the right time in my life, to basically show me what was possible. I really admire writers like Hari Kunzru, because he is a novelist who never repeats. Him and Colson and Whitehead, are the two writers I always go to, because they never repeat in their novels. And everything they do is so different from the last thing, and I really love the bravery of that. There's a writer called, Niven Govinden, who has been, like, such a mentor to me. And when I first came across him, he was a writer I deeply admired, but he made time to basically mentor me, and like, help me find my first book deal, which was really, really amazing. I could go on, and on, and on.

JF: Yeah, but that's a good list, thank you for that. And we've got a final question from our audience, from Scott. Hi, Scott, what's your question?

Boy: What are you currently writing?

NS: What am I currently writing? So, I am working on a memoir about parenting, called, Brown Baby, which comes out next year, in 2020, at some point. And I'm working on some super-secret stuff for the screen, that I can't talk about.

JF: Aha, exciting. You've got us interested. Very good, thank you very much. And thanks for your questions on Twitter. So we've got a couple here for you, Nikesh.



From Abi, shes in S3 at Castlemilk High School in Glasgow. This is a good one, we want to know the answer to this. Nikesh, do authors make a lot of money?

Aud: [Laughter].

NS: Some do, most don't, is probably the reality.

JF: I guess it's not a good reason to go into writing, is it, if you want to make a lot of dosh?

NS: No. I guess, I have, I am sort of, a full time writer, as in, I don't have, like, a job. But I have what's referred to as, a portfolio career.

JF: Right, so you do lots of different things?

NS: Which means I'll do, basically, yeah, I do lots of different things. You know, sometimes I might need to go, oh I need to do this to earn some money. Or sometimes, like, I might be lucky to be really well paid for a job, and that might help me out for three or four months.

JF: Sure.

NS: Its very hand to mouth, for me, at the moment.

JF: Yeah.

NS: You know, some authors do, I mean, I imagine people like J. K. Rowling are doing okay.

JF: She'll be alright for money, I think.

NS: Yeah. She wrote a book called, Harry Potter, I don't know if you guys have come across it?

JF: Have you heard of it? Yeah, up and coming young writer.

NS: But I think the main thing is, don't write your novel thinking, well this is going to sell for a mil. Just write it because it's a novel that you have to write, and no one else will.

JF: Yeah, great. And just another one, this is also, this is from Ciara, S3 at Castlemilk High. And just briefly, I mean, you've kind of told us about this anyway, but shes just asking more, how you felt after suffering those racist attacks?

NS: I felt horrible. I felt useless, I felt sad and depressed. And the thing about those, the one that happened in 2016 is, you can't look away from what's happening in the news. And what was happening in Charlottesville around that time, and what's happening with, you know, the far-right up and down this country, and in America, and in bits of Europe. And you kind of go, you know, suddenly all of that stuff that you see in the news, suddenly feels very close to home. And then you realise, it's always been close to home.

JF: And I think what is so powerful about what you have done today with the readings, and also talking about it, is that whole idea of how people might think they're doing the right thing by saying, oh you're alright. But actually, I think for all of us to learn from that, if there's somebody whos suffered from a racial attack, or any other kind of attack, it's like, let them tell you how they feel, don't try and make that experience any less. It's a great big thing for folk to deal with, and to find a way through it.

NS: Yeah, and I think that applies to most things around mental health.

JF: Yeah.

NS: You know, don't minimise what someone's going through, you know, ask them what they need.

JF: Indeed. No, that's so powerful. And I guess it's also, you know, you've written the kind of book that maybe you wished had been around when you were growing up.

NS: Yeah, definitely.

JF: So that is a fantastic thing you've done. And this is a brilliant thing you've done today, thank you, Nikesh...

NS: No, thank you.

JF: ...for the brilliant session. Can we have a huge round of applause, please, for Nikesh Shukla?

Aud: [Applause].

NS: Thank you, thanks, guys.

JF: Absolutely terrific, it's given me lots to think about, let alone everybody else whos been watching, and with us here in the studio. As ever, this event will be available to watch again, because if you enjoyed it so much, you just want to watch it again. But actually, Nikesh has gone through a lot of different issues, so

you might want to, perhaps, you know, get your families to watch, or friends who might have missed it. Because its available to watch, along with all of our other Authors Live events, and there are so many of them. Worth having a wee look through that. The place to go online is, [scottishbooktrust/authorslive](http://scottishbooktrust/authorslive). So we hope that you continue to have a fantastic Book Week Scotland. There are events happening all over the country. I mean, I'm confident in saying, there's an event near you, they're everywhere, right across Scotland. And the BBC's lab team have been working with pupils from Smithycroft Secondary School, who are in Glasgow, and with us here, on a short film, brilliant subject, a film about what confidence looks like. And here's the thing, we're going to see some of the pupils on camera, but also, they made the film with the lab team, so they're all doing stuff behind the camera, too, and learning how to do production. So, interesting, what confidence looks like to them, so we're going to leave you with that. And hope to see you again for more Authors Live very soon.

Boy: Confidence is the ability to speak in front of a lot of people.

Boy: Confidence is people that can speak for themselves, and feel as if they can do something.

Boy: Confidence is not caring what other people think about you.

Boy: Confidence is doing something without being scared or afraid.

Boy: Being confident is when you are standing straight, with your shoulders back, and your head up.

Girl: Feeling confident in how you look, and not caring what others think about you.

Boy: To me, being confident is when you're not sure about something, but you go and do it anyway.

Boy: If you're confident, you can overcome your fears.