

New Suns: Speculative Fiction by People of Colour

- Nyla Ahmad, host
- Nisi Shawl
- Andrea Hairston

NYLA	<p>Hello and welcome to Book Week Scotland. The event that you're about to watch is part of the Book Week Scotland 2020 digital festival. I have the honour to be discussing today the book New Suns.</p> <p>New Suns is an anthology of original speculative fiction by people of colour. This anthology has been edited by Nisi Shawl. Nisi is an author of works of science fiction, fantasy and non-fiction. Nisi's work Filter House was one of two winners in the 2008 James Tiptree Junior award.</p> <p>Her book Everfair, a novel, was a finalist in the 2016 Nebula Award. There, the co-author was Cynthia Ward of Writing The Other bridging cultural differences in Writing The Other and their works have been featured in various publications. I'm also joined today by Andrea Hairston. Andrea is an award-winning playwright, novelist and scholar, she has published four novels: Will Do Magic for Small Change, a finalist for the Lambda and Tiptree awards; Redwood and Wildfire winner of the Tiptree and Carl Brandon Award; and Mindscape, winner of the Carl Brandon Award too. She has written essays and plays and her work has been featured in various publications including, of course, New Suns, the book we'll be discussing today. In her free time, she is the Louise Wolff Kahn 1931 Professor of theatre and Africana studies at Smith College, and artistic director of Chrysalis Theatre.</p> <p>Her most recent novel Master of Poisons was released earlier this year.</p> <p>Thank you so much both for joining me today. Welcome to Book Week Scotland. Nisi, we were speaking right before I hit the record button about the fact that you used to live in Scotland?</p>
NISI	Yes, mainly on the island of Tiree in the Outer Hebrides – ah, in the town of Cornaigmore.
NYLA	Amazing. Would you ever come back?
NISI	Oh yes, Come on. Here I, I want you to invite me all. Yeah.
NYLA	So, I guess as a jump off point I'd like to ask you, Nisi, about your motivation and experience of putting anthology together.
NISI	Oh, my motivation. I was actually, I was invited to put it on. To put it together. It was not my idea, but it sounded a great idea, yeah.

	And the experience of putting it together was just so, so gratifying.
NYLA	That's fantastic. How did you go about choosing your contributors?
NISI	They were mostly people that I knew. People that I knew were fantastic writers, people whose voices I thought should be out there. And people who I wanted to have people paying more attention too. People that, I know people, I knew the audience was there – I just wanted to, like, you know, amp it up.
NYLA	Yes. Yeah, that makes sense. Andrea, what was your experience of contributing to the anthology?
ANDREA	<p>Well, you know, generally speaking I don't write short stories. So Nisi and I were at a conference Black to the Future at Princeton University and we had a prompt at a group writing session and so the idea for the story came to me at that, at that session and I was actually sitting next to Nisi and I wrote some lines out on it, and then later, you know, I can't quite remember exactly when, but it may not have been at that conference, but Nisi mentioned she was gonna do this book and I said again, you know, I don't write short stories. But at, since it was Nisi I said well, I, I can do this – so very few people can get me to do that and I thought, oh - and then there was that story idea I had sitting next Nisi, so it all seemed like fate. And another friend said well, but you could use this as beginning point for a play or a novel, and then it all came together. I went 'oh, right, of course I can do that...and I'll think of it as, like, a one act play, thus I will keep it at a shorter length than my usual endeavors.'"</p> <p>And then, you know, plus it was Nisi, I mean, you know, just underline that part, 'cos I believe in her vision and I trust her and she's, you know, like been a force in science fiction and fantasy and does so many wonderful things. So why wouldn't I want to be part of that, and then why wouldn't I want to be part of the other people that she would invite? So, it all seemed like 'this is fate – so I will overcome my sense of myself and write this short story'.</p>
NYLA	That's absolutely fantastic. On that note, could we talk a little bit about the contributors to the novel? Could you tell us a little about some of them? Not of the novel, sorry, the anthology. Could you tell us a little bit about them?
NISI	Ah sure, I have a whole list of them right here, right sitting next to me on the desk and, so let's see, Tobias Buckell: I've met him a couple of times and I was very much interested in his works, the first time I read a short story, it was, an anthology where the idea was that men were writing from the viewpoint of women. And he was, he stood out as someone who, all the others were, like, "we will do this, and we will talk about pregnancy", and he talked about

	<p>birth control. I thought, well, that's insightful. Kathleen Alcala who lives on an island near Seattle where I live and, just has done so many fabulous things. That was what really got to me. It was like, these people have done wonderful things. Let me see if I can get them to do wonderful things in this book.</p> <p>Uh, Steven Barnes who wrote a short story that was so funny the first time he read it aloud the audience, uh, started snorting milk out of their noses laughing uncontrollably, and a lot of the people I met through writing workshop Clarion West. That was how I met you, right, Andrea?</p>
ANDREA	Yep. At Clarion West in 1999.
NISI	<p>Yep. Chinelo Onwualu who was a Clarion West attendee and Octavia Butler scholar. Alex Jennings, similarly. He lives in New Orleans now, but he came up here and we bonded over Michael Jackson as a figure in science fiction stories.</p> <p>Alberto Yanez - ah, - everything that I've ever read by him has just blown me away. He's working as a nurse right now during this pandemic in Portland, Oregon. But, yeah, story devastating.</p> <p>Lilly Yu, who actually I saw her, I think for the first time – although we had corresponded – I saw her for the first time at that conference that you mentioned Andrea.</p>
ANDREA	Black to the Future?
NISI	<p>Black to the Future. She, she was, she's not black, she was not at the conference, but she and I hung out and went to a statue of H G Wells I think it was. Right before that, yeah.</p> <p>Who else? Jaymee, I met Jaymee...</p>
ANDREA	Jaymee Goh?
NISI	Jaymee Goh at WisCon and, no she went to the other Clarion.
ANDREA	Ah, San Diego? She went to...
NISI	Yes, yeah so but nonetheless a deep bond and, um...
NISI	<p>She's one of the few people I know who has written anti-colonialist steampunk. So, yeah, had to call on her, even though her story's not steampunk.</p> <p>Uh, who else have we got? Karin Lowachee who I still have not met but who's work again had impressed me and I thought it needed to be brought to another audience.</p> <p>Ah, Silvia Moreno-Garcia. Her story just broke my heart,, and I've almost met her. We were both supposed to appear at the same event, and she could not, alas.</p>

	<p>Indrapramit Das, another Clarion West graduate, another Octavia Butler scholar.</p> <p>Anil Menon, another Clarion West graduate, he, half the time he lives in Virginia in the US and half the time he lives in India. I'm not sure of his exact location there.</p>
ANDREA	<p>But he also comes to WisCon too...'cos I've met a lot of these people not at Clarion West, but at various conventions, so...</p>
NISI	<p>Yeah, yeah. Hiromi Goto – she was a guest of honour at WisCon...</p>
ANDREA	<p>Right...</p>
NISI	<p>...and, gave a speech that I reference again and again as 'these are the questions you need to ask yourselves if you're part of a dominant paradigm and you want to write about someone who is outside the dominant paradigm if you want to represent people who are not, uh, part of the mainstream' no.</p> <p>Rebecca Roanhorse, um, still never met her, um, but of course I had read her work and, and wanted to include it and Darcie Little Badger, um, who I finally met at Readercon, yay!</p>
ANDREA	<p>Oh – when you were guest of honour?</p>
NISI	<p>Oh yeah.</p>
ANDREA	<p>Yeah, underline that, yes.</p>
NISI	<p>OK, when I was guest of honour.</p>
NYLA	<p>Yeah...that's an incredible list so, like, absolutely fantastic. And I'm getting a real sense of community, em, and when you're talking about it off, of these are people that you see at these events, an, the sort of networking.</p> <p>In the introduction written by Levar Burton, he talks about how there's a new age of speculative fiction, not least because of the inclusion of more voices from people of colour. Um, how do you feel about the current speculative fiction landscape?</p>
NISI	<p>It's a blessing on us all. Talk about it Andrea...</p>
ANDREA	<p>Well, you know, it, it's so interesting 'cos both Nisi and I have been doing this for a long time, you know. So when I went to Clarion, um, Nisi gave me a book by Nalo Hopkinson, um, called Brown Girl in the Ring and, um, I was so thrilled to find that book and then Octavia Butler was one of my teachers at Clarion in 1999 and Sheree Renée Thomas was at, at Clarion West in 1999 and she was about to do an anthology called Dark Matter, um, which would include a whole range of people and be the, you know, an</p>

	<p>anthology of, um, you know, fiction from the African, eh, speculative fiction from the African diaspora. So, that was beg-, you know, happening at the end of the 20th century, um, so here we are 20 years later, um, and, you know, we've been, like, working before the 20th century, right. So, you know, there are all these people in their 50s writing and Sheree collected some of those in Dark Matter and then, you know, we've been working – people, you know wrote me, um, rejection letters saying 'this is wonderful, but who's the audience for this? We can't have that". Um, or "this is a strange book" - and it wasn't really a strange book – it was Redwood a Wildflower. But the characters were strange. They were, um, African American, Native American, you know. What are you doing? Um, now I have a contract from a big house and they're gonna re-issue those books. So, we have seen an, am-, you know, literally a big turnaround. No-one is saying these are strange characters in the same way. They figured out something else say. Um, but now that we, you know, and to be honest, now you have many, many writers, you know, like, I'm starting not to know everybody. For a while, didn't we know everybody, Nisi?</p>
NISI	Yeah...
ANDREA	<p>Now, how many old people? I haven't met them all, um, and that's really exciting, you know. Someone will bring up a name and I don't know the name because now, you know, the, the, the capacity, the possibility of it, is out there so more people who've always been writing and thinking are getting their stuff out, you know. There will always be these amazing, um, writers and stories that, you know, the, the gatekeepers were saying "well, there's no audience" or "this is weird – I think it's therefore bad. Just because I don't have a reference for it", um, you know, and so now we have people who are editors who are asking us to do things, you. Coming to us rather than us having to, like, break down the door, break down the gate. So, I think this is good. But I also do remember blacksploitation 'cos I'm old enough. And there was a wonderful period, you know, in the 70s, when were were all of these black films coming out and it was just amazing, uh, and then it disappeared. So, um, I want to make sure that this is not just the flavour of the year, uh, or the, the flavour of the couple of years, um. I wanna sustain what we're doing so that we have, you, know, we're back our own horse. Still writing five years from now, um, or you know, people who, like, you know, are, are emerging now get to be, like, grand old authors who have, like, this fabulous career with range and different things and have talked to one another, and developed, you know, whole new ways of seeing, so that's what I'm hoping that we're about to launch right now.</p>
NISI	Yeah. It, it is a community. It definitely is a community. I can remember going to, uh, say, the convention Wiscon and I would

	make it a point whenever I went to science fiction conventions to personally shake the hand of every, not just every African American, but every person of colour that I encountered. I can't do that anymore.
ANDREA	No.
NISI	No. We'll have a get-together dinner or celebratory and there'll be over 100 people.
ANDREA	100 people, yeah.
NISI	Yep.
NYLA	That's, that's incredible. Em, what I'm noticing when we're talking about this – and Nisi when you talked Tobias of, I'm getting this sense of talking about authenticity, em, in representation and talking about exploitation and avoiding that. I was wondering, sort of, h-, what role do you think, um, authenticity from the author plays in speculative fiction?
NISI	Authenticity is a word that I actually avoid as much as possible, uh, because there is no-one out there authenticating any of this stuff. Um, the, the term I'm more familiar with and more comfortable with is, um, it, it developed on Twitter it's a hashtag – own voices – and that, to me, talks about how you can bring something new to the experience, um, by talking with your own voice about it. Uh, so that's what I look for more, uh, authenticity just reminds me of being told that my work is not authentic enough. I, I wrote a short story set in a, a , a neighborhood, um, that, I, modelled on one that I grew up in and was told by the editors that it basically didn't have enough crime in it for people to believe that it a black neighborhood. Yeah, yeah, I can just roll my eyes at that, but I had to actually write a couple of sentences explaining that this was a bourgie neighborhood. This was a black bourgeois neighborhood, and, uh, you know, that bit didn't have that much crime. But to the white editor that I was presenting this story, there, you know, it was enough that it, because it didn't have crime-ridden neighborhood. Do, what do you say to that, Andrea?
ANDREA	Well, authenticity really has a very unfortunate history. It's, it's really in, in the United States about the fact that we have a, you know, a, a really diverse population and we're gonna mark it, um, 'authentic'. We're gonna market certain stereotypes as characteristics of large groups of people and we're gonna use that, at the turn of the 20th century, really a lot to say 'this is authentic Indian culture. This is authentic Negro culture. This is authentic Irish culture'..all that stuff becomes a marketing tool and it really is about the stereotypes that come out of the 19th century that were on, on the stage um, that

	<p>were, you, in minstrel shows. You had who the types were, and you could do their language, you could say what their repertoire of, of behaviour is. You could say that this is the crime places, this is the, you know, the intellectuals, these are the wild, you know, artistic ones – all that stuff. And that was used, um, actually against people having diversity like, you know, you, like there are many ways to be any of these things. To be Irish, to be African American, to be indigenous, the, you know, and so the sense that you could, like, market it all though, in, like you know, sort of the, the, the, I don't know, the Indian who stands at the, the, the smoke shop, you know. That, you know, with a, with a big, eh, Lakota feather, um, headdress, and that will become Indian even if you, your people never wore those headdresses, right?</p> <p>Never, ever, like you're not a plains Indian, you don't know what they're talking about – but you are not now 'authentic', um, anymore, 'cos you, know, you didn't do any of that and you were like, a farmer, and you, you know your whole culture has like been flogging forever and you, wandering around those plains, right. But were you an authentic Indian, since you were doing cowboy movies? Um, so, you know, um, that is where 'authentic' comes from and I think it's a capitalist term, so I think the hashtag is trying to get at the notion that we have, like, uh, you know, a diversity of voices within each one of us as well as within groups. And that's a tricky thing to n-, negotiate in a capitalist environment when, you know, we wanna like slot you, and sell you based on a label, right. We'd like to-, and then that label will be your brand and then brand will make us money. So, there's an impulse toward branding that I think the hashtag is trying to counter – at the same time to get at not being exploited, not having your culture and your stories exploited.</p>
NISI	Yeah. Yeah.
NYLA	It's almost like the, "no, buy this one – this is the proper one"...
ANDREA	<p>Yeah. Right. Right...and, and then who, who, who's getting to say what's authentic. What Nisi was saying about her neighborhood wasn't. Or the neighborhood that she invented for her story wasn't authentic? Um, someone told me - at Clarion, in fact – that since I had a black woman who was the scientist, who codes, who could do code sliding and spoke German that that wasn't an authentic, eh, character and there were no black people like that. I'm a black woman, I code slide and "on echt en Deutsch". So, you know, it was like people telling me to my face that I'm not real...</p> <p>You know, you don't exist. Uh, when I was a physics major, that was another problem – she could do physics, you know, um, so...</p>

NYLA	I find it really interesting when we talk about, speculative fiction, sometimes when it comes to representation of people of colour there still seems to be limitations?
ANDREA	Yep.
NYLA	We're...we, we're, half the time on a different planet or on another plane some-...there's so many different characters but then, when it comes to representation of people of colour, that's where it kicks in for people.
ANDREA	Yep. The, the notion is that white people are, contain multitudes. You can be anything, so you're not limited to certain brand or, as, eh, like, OK, you're from wherever – you're, you know, Chinese so you must be this. Um, it's very, you know, still with us in 2020. Em, yeah, yeah, really, wow, I picked Chinese too...in 2020, so...
NYLA	What kind of responsibility do you feel authors of speculative fiction have when they're writing? And do you consider that when you're writing speculative fiction yourself?
NISI	Responsibility, I have a responsibility to be true to the story. Um, the wish, in my case, you know, it, it involves being true what I've experienced and true to something, something inside me, or something that is, is not so quantifiable, um, I don't – didn't we come up with a statement Andrea, at that conference, um, that where, um, I think one of the lines was, uh, it had some swears in it. But it was something like 'we pledge to write whatever feel like'.
ANDREA	<p>Mm mm. Yeah. Well, I, I, yeah, 'cos I think one other thing is, eh, you know, people would ask Octavia Butler like, you know, shouldn't you, right, realism, 'cos black people need realism. Um, so there's this sense that we have to social labour when we're doing our art, you know. In a, in a way different than other artists, right, so, um, and I think that's what we're trying to say, like. We will write what we feel as artists that we need to write, um, that said I feel as an artist, um, you know, for me, it's part of my spiritual practice, right. So, um what I'm doing as an artist is trying to, um, eh, find the truth in me and in my world that I'm guided through my spiritual practice to find, um. That's not a choice I impose on anyone, that's just, you know, what I'm doing so it's back to that expletive I write what I want to write, and it's based on that. Um, and I think one of the, again this goes back to the troubles like, if it will sell, then should I write it? That's the, the question, you know. If it will sell, should I write it?</p> <p>Now the 'should' part is, you know, a problematic. But the 'if it will sell' has to do with the social context of where we all are, like, OK. So, some of us are going to feel that pressure and do different things. But, you know, why do, um, you know, you know, people of</p>

	<p>colour have to have a special, uh, response like... that's the question all artists have to answer, right. What am I, what am I doing with my art and, um, so whatever that, the answer to that question is, it, it's not because you're a person of colour that you answer it a certain way? You know, that, of course, has an impact on you. When you deal with that impact how you deal with it. Um, so I think we were all really tired of the social burdens.</p>
NISI	<p>Yes.</p>
ANDREA	<p>Oh lord, here I am. You know, like, I gotta drag this rock up the hill, um. And, no, I, I'm, I refuse to drag that rock up the hill. That is a question for artists to answer and they answer it how they answer it, and they have to, they are therefore, they deal with the consequences. So, if people don't like your stuff 'cos you answered that question a certain way, then you deal with that, right. You, you come to terms with that, um, but, you know, we.... yeah, go ahead Nisi...</p>
NISI	<p>I was gonna say, I actually have, uh, the more I think influence on, you know, a, more responsibility as an editor than as a writer, yeah, you know. Because I have a responsibility, which I try to fulfil, of getting this stuff out there where people could see it. Uh, one of the, the contributors to New Suns – Alex Jennings – gave me a choice of two stories, uh, and he was concerned that I would not want the one that I published because there are no black people in it. So, like are we supposed to write stories with, you know, that only feature people of colour? No. And who would tell us to do that? But he had been trained already, a, a, as a beginning writer he had been trained to know that people expect that kind of content. I published the better story.</p>
ANDREA	<p>Yes.</p>
NYLA	<p>I guess talking about that question, and talking about the expectations of, people of colour in, in industry, em, could you speak. Little bit not he expectations – or additional expectations – that you feel have been placed upon you writing form your own perspectives?</p>
NISI	<p>Silence...</p>
ANDREA	<p>Um, wow. I, I, you know, I think, I've been writing for a really long time 'cos I'm pretty old, um, and I've felt the benefit of my communities supporting me, so, um, when I was a younger writer, umm, I has as models people like Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry and, you know, Lor- the, Lorraine Hansberry's second play was The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window, which was about Jewish characters mostly and there were, I think, one, there's one</p>

	<p>black character in it but, you know, and people were like “what are you writing about?” Then she wrote uh, Les Blancs, which was about Africans, not African Americans – there was like, “that’s not. You really want to write about African Americans, this is just like a code for that” and she was like, ‘no’. Um, so and then she, you know, she wrote, um, what she was called to write and, um, so I think that she was like one of my models ‘cos I’m in the theatre, um. And she also wrote speculative. Her, her play about Africa was about a future Africa at the time. Um, and so I felt like, you know, that’s what you do in the theatre, so I, I, you know, when was coming up, I had, you know, all of these models and theatre artists, um, you know, really, um, trying to g-, you know, explore what called to them in, um, you know, definite respectful ways but, you know, I had Anna Deavere Smith as a model in the 90s and she would just go and talk to anyone, and then try to embody them. That’s a real, like, an, and her, her goal was to be true to that experience so that where her, her responsibility came. She was trying not to miss, um, you know, you know, or do someone who didn’t want to be done. Like if you said ‘don’t do me’ she wouldn’t do you. But of you said ‘yes, do me’ then she would try to do you as best she could and learn from that, like, journey from what she called ‘self to other’.</p> <p>And so, for me, that’s the journey I’ve been on, like. ‘Cos that’s the actor’s journey, um, you know, the actor even in representing myself, even if I play Andrea, it’s an Andrea in my mind that I journey to. And that on that journey, I will get to the, the amazing, the, you know, in the theatre of my mind I will have a lot of fun. It’s fun not being myself. I will have insights ‘cos I’ll see the world differently, um, and then I will also make a community because I-, as I journey from myself to others, I join with them in a way that’s very different. So, I make community, I have fun. And I have insights and, and I’m, and that’s what I’m doing as an artist. So, you know, it, does that answer your question?</p>
NYLA	Yeah, I guess so. I think sort of, talking about what you do as an artist, it’s almost you-, like you’re talking about the expectations of yourselves...
ANDREA	Yeah. Yeah...
NYLA	...of what you want to be doing.
ANDREA	Yeah.
NISI	I really like that you had a model for that as well. At least you found one, you know.
ANDREA	Yeah.

NISI	Ah, and in my case, um, yeah, no I just, I, I have had the same sort of pressure that I was talking about with Alex, you know. Um, my story Water Museum, um, which LeVar Burton by the way, uh, read for part, for one of his podcasts, all white characters in that. That one was hard to sell, Em, it's like if you write from your real experience it's got to be a certain kind of real experience.
ANDREA	Right.
NISI	And so now I'm working on the sequel to Everfair which was my first novel. And, I really think that the success of the movie Black Panther is why they asked me to write this. Everfair is about an imagined, eh, sort of semi-utopia on the African continent. So that novel, I'm eight chapters into it now. It's starts out freaking Donmuang, Vietnam, OK. You know, and Cairo and Sri Lanka – it's not con-, confined to the African continent, um, you know, it takes place in, in all these other places, um, and I don't want to confine myself in what I write to one particular...place genre, group of characters – anything like that. It's my world.
ANDREA	Yeah. You write the rules, that a line from one of my poems. Um, I, I really feel that there's been pressure on me. You know, but, em, hmm, how can I even say this? You know, so again when I've sent out my novels, em, I, um, published initially at Aqueduct Press, um, Timmel Duchamp she, um, said 'Yay! Let's, you know, oh we'll publish this" but, um when I sent them out it wasn't that the, you know, the writing was bad, it's just that I wasn't doing what was expected, um, you know, I wasn't fitting in my slot - how will we market this? Who will buy this? Um, oh my god you've got a black character who speaks German. You have German characters, in fact, you know – and I spent a lot of time in Germany so, it's, you know, very interesting to me, like, and I'm like 'oh, well' and that image pops in my mind and I use it. Um, so I'm not limited to writing about a certain world with certain perspective, um, and, eh, so that's been, ha-, hard, you know, actually. But in terms of plays, you know, people don't want the play like, "wow, no-one will come to see this", I mean, it's amazing what the, the gatekeepers have been saying and now I have a, a major contract with a, a, you know publisher and um, you know, I, everything that has happened has allowed that contract to happen and, um, so, um, but I'm still writing what I want. 'Cos to me that is what is success. Success is telling the story you want, how you want to tell it and getting it to your public. So that's been the pressure on me, not the people telling me that what I wanted to write about or who I wanted to write about, um, you know, weren't valuable or, or, you shouldn't write about them. So...
NYLA	What advice would you give to people who want to write stories outside of their own perspectives?

ANDREA	Ooooh...
NISI	That is a whole book.
NYLA	Yeah, I'm pretty sure you wrote that, didn't you?
ANDREA	Yeah...
NISI	Yeah. Um, the first piece of advice is forming an essay I'm actually working on now which is get over yourself. Em, people who are doing this are often worried about the consequences to themselves, you know. Everyone's gonna, eh, scorn me and, and pile on me on social media and editors won't talk to me and publishers will, you know, say 'never darken my door again'. Get over that. Just. It is not about you. Just realise that um, what you're talking about it - that you may have an actual harmful effect that may cost people their health, their liberty, even their lives in some cases if you do it wrong. So, it's not about, you know, people being mean to you, uh, as a consequence of getting it wrong. It's about people being mean to those who resemble your subjects if you get it wrong. That's the first think I would say.
ANDREA	Yeah, so de-centre yourself, right, um, because that's, that has been, I think one of the troubles with the storytellers. The storytellers that we have had before centered on them in this, in our culture and back to this in the United States we have, you know, a, a multi-cultural society but everyone has not had access to storytelling, to defining the narratives of our, our nation. So, certain stories dominate the, the narrative landscape and define it, because all stories nest in the narrative landscape of, you know, the nation where the stories are being told and then the world since we are a world culture now. So, really, you, first you have to realise that decanter, like, oh my gosh, you know, like I am not the most important thing. That's what Nisi is saying and...
NISI	Yeah.
ANDREA	...also, you know, um, do, you know, one of the early theatre practitioner's idea - well not early, but 19th century, 20th century - is Stanislavski- you can find within you all the stories in the world. That's not true, right. So, you know, you know, it was called effective emotional recall where you could recall something in your life and compare it to characters and therefore understand them. Um, no. Like, you know, let, again, decentre, 'cos that's centring on you. Centre on who you want to write about, not on you, and then make that journey, that's the, the Ana De' vera smith method. Centre on them, you know. Centre on whatever you're writing, I mean, this is actually good practice for writers on everything you

	<p>write, right. Start to, you know, you know, really, like, what, what do the characters I'm writing about need? Feel? You know. How are they in this big narrative landscape as opposed to centring on yourself and how you feel, right. And so that's a hard journey because we're not necessarily trained to do that, um, you know, we're trained to think of, of, you know, certain stories as central. Um, what if we told the entire of this planet from the point of view of the bacteria, right?</p>
NISI	Yes.
ANDREA	<p>And I'm gonna give the, give that's something I'm actually even thinking about, right. So, the be-, you know, we like, uh, one, I was sitting around with a group of academics and one said, "let's just get rid of all the bacteria, they're the problem" and I was like "Woah..."</p> <p>And this guy was an economist, not a biologist, right. 'Cos if you're a biologist hopefully you will not make that statement. But then I turned to him, I said "you know, there are more bacterial cells in your body than 'your cells'..", right, "...so the mass of you is mostly bacteria and you couldn't do anything, you couldn't like, see, digest, you know, heartbeat, think, without the bacteria. What are you talking about?!"</p> <p>And he looked at me like I had lost my mind, you know. Like I was spinning science fiction. And I, then I decided, OK, you gotta write about that - that's gonna be something you're gonna write about like, you know, you know - 'cos we think we're the rulers of the planet, right. That's a story that we tell and I'm using that one 'cos it's, you know, it's funny. But, think about how we do that all the time, like, the perspective that is particular we generalise and universalise and then it dominates and, then, you can't see anything else. Or feel anything else, or experience anything else. So, get over that, like Nisi says.</p>
NISI	And I do think that New Suns can help you do that.
ANDREA	Yeah...
NISI	I think, I think that reading a, other people's perspectives can help you realise that the - other people have perspectives. They're all subjects.
ANDREA	Yeah...and that there are many worlds.
NYLA	Definitely. Definitely. I think, em, talking about that, what the sort of reception you've had to New Suns? And have you connected with the audiences you were hoping you would connect to with it?

NISI	Yeah...and, and we keep doing it. We keep getting more and more. I mean, this is a book that is over a year old and it is being a, uh, it is reaching new audiences all the time through, uh, through the Scottish Book Trust, yes.
ANDREA	Yay...
NISI	...in the US through, um, Science Friday which is a national programme that is discussing, uh, the different stories within it and having the, all the members of their book club across the country read it and , eh, talking with the authors and with scientists who know about the premises that it's based on. So yeah, it's reaching a lot of people and I'm very, very happy about that. All the awards make it...
ANDREA	Oh yeah, all the awards.
NISI	Yeah. What, it's like three awards now? Um, the Locust Magazine award, um, the, uh, Starburst Magazine...
ANDREA	Starburst.
NISI	Yeah, yeah.
ANDREA	And is the last one World Fantasy?
NISI	Um, it's nominated at World Fantasy, but it has not, hum been presented yet.
ANDREA	Yeah, right, so soon you, you will hear about that.
NISI	Probably by the time we air this it'll be known. Yeah. But, eh, eh, we have three awards, we're hoping for a fourth and, yes, that all really helps get the word out.
NYLA	Fantastic. Speaking, em, of the book, Andrea, your story in this book – Dumb House – talks about, ah, it's, it's really lovely. I felt quite cosy reading it. It, it was, it was, yeah, it was, it was a wonderful read, em, and I was wondering 'cos you're talking about things like tech obsolesce, you're talking about smart technology – how much does real world technology, in the real world context, info your writing when you choose to a speculative fiction?
ANDREA	Um, well, I, uh-, yeah. See, a whole lot of things came to my mind and I couldn't get them all out. So, I've been doing a lot of research on, um, technology, it's impact on society, on artificial intelligence, um, on, um, you know, hot, you know, these are new things and how do they affect us? And also, the, to me the major notion that some people think technology is neutral. That it's really people that

	<p>are bias but, you know, technology is just neutral. It's how an individual uses them and, um, when you get to something like an algorithm, you know, that's not really true. Um, so when I started that story, that's what I was thinking and as I, you know, I've been, it's gonna be novel eventually, or part of a novel. Um, as I've been doing research more and more research has come out about that uh, you know, how we have algorithms of repression. How, um, you know the math weapons of destruction, you know, we have algorithms that really, you know, reinscribe, you know, oppressive systems that the, the ones who programmed those a-, algorithms already had internalised. And in fact, you know, there's, you know, Ruha Benjamin who, um, was at the black, who, who, organised the Black to the Future, um, uh, grouping – or conference – wrote a book called Race After Technology and it really is about the new Jim code and how the codes, you know, we often think coding is just for the computers, but, codes are around us all the time and have encoded, um, oppression, you know, back to the constitution where black people were three fifths of a human being. That's a code. That, that voting results, or that results in the electoral college and that results in, um, you know, the National elections where, you know, the majority of voters do not select, um, their leader, right. That's coding. And that's the impact of coding on us now, uh, that started in, you know, a long time ago. So, uh, and all that is, in, like, how cameras react to skin colour is coded in 19th century photography practices, right. So all of things are there and, so with the, uh, sort of, illusion of neutrality of our technology – something that I've been really, um, concerned with – for 20 years, um, so this short story comes out of that interest, out of that concern, um and the idea that, you know, whatever your tool is, you have to be clear on, you know, what it replaces and what it does to you and, you know, the pencil's a really good piece of technology, um. So, you know, we don't throw it away just because we have another tool, but you know, it has its limitations and it has, like, you can drop it in the, the ocean and it, you can pick it out still write with it. So, it has its advantages and, um, the commercial world is different than what the tool is doing, right. And so commercial world values that tell us what we should throw away or, what we should like. Why not have bicycles, right? You know, cars are not necessarily better, heh, they're better for some things but not for all. So, you, bicycles used to be on the roads, for, in the, the roads were for walkers and, and bicyclists and that's why we paved the roads and, you know, initially it's for bicycles, not for cars. And then cars took advantage of that and then now we think of roads as for cars, not for bicyclists, or, which, who, that's why We paved them. Or for pedestrians which who, who used to walk down them, you know. So, um, and we have short memories about how those things happen. So.</p>
NISI	...your cultural memory.

ANDREA	Uh...what?
NISI	Your cultural memories.
ANDREA	Short cultural memories, right. So I, that's something I want to do, um, in Dumb House is to, um, you know, have someone who is, you know, not, eh, I quote "luddite" and again that's like false history 'cos luddites weren't against technology, they were against, you know, the owners, huh, um, of and, and the exploitation, so I want us to be clear about why we want certain technology and how we use it – and not just takes the company line. Not just decide that because you are giving me this technology it equals progress.
NYLA	That's an excellent answer. Em, speaking of algorithms and thinking of technology and noting that we're living through a global pandemic at the moment, do you think we're gonna hit a point where speculative fiction doesn't feel like escapism anymore?
NISI	Do, do I think what?
NYLA	Do you think we'll ever hit a point where speculative fiction doesn't feel like escapism anymore?
NISI	Hmmm...you know, actually...hmm...to me at this point speculative fiction is more escapism the ever and it's, it's a really positive thing to be able to escape.
ANDREA	Yeah.
NISI	So, I, I'm, I'm not looking for point at which it will stop being escapism. I, I'm happy with-it being escapism and, um, really there's a lot to escape right now.
ANDREA	Well the, the implications are like, you know, here we are with the arts, the arts are like, morally suspect because, you know, they take you out of the mundane. That's literally the reason you do art. To get out of the day-to-day whatever that might mean. So, um, art is not what you see outside your window. Art is, you know, this other experience – it's alternative to what you see outside your window. Now it may incorporate what you see outside you window, but it really is about alternatives, about like, like what Nisi was saying earlier, you know, like other worlds, other possibilities. So I think, um, the idea that you escape and it's bad, um, has to do with, um, like a sort of in, in the US again, a puritan ethic of we should be like "OK, everything is about work and we work hard, and we sit on hard benches" you know. I live in New England, all the churches had hard benches so people wouldn't fall asleep in church, right. Uh, you know - so you had to sit up and, like, pay attention, um as

	<p>opposed to like a worship service where you had fun, right. You, know this was hard work, and hard work is better for you because if you're fun-loving then you won't be serious, um, you know, people even, you know, some psychologists have wondered why we have this capacity for imagination. I think it was Stephen Pinker, he said like "why did, why did natural selection allow us to be imaginative? Why did it just have us, you know, see the reality for reality" and I'm, like, wow.</p> <p>Like everything we do comms form that capacity to imagine so, for me, it's really important to be able to escape the mundane. I mean, I think what, was Neil Gaimon said "only jailers don't want you to escape" ...I think.</p>
ANDREA	<p>Yeah right, so jailers wouldn't want you, you know, be escapers. Um, so, uh, like it doesn't mean that you are necessarily running away from, um, viewing with the pandemic – but we don't need to do it 24/7.</p>
NISI	<p>And I do, I do, um, and I do a bit of teaching and, um, cannot let a day go by without mentioning Samuel Delaney...</p>
ANDREA	<p>Yeah.</p>
NISI	<p>...and what he talks about is how, um, in comparison to what we will denigratingly call mimetic fiction...</p>
ANDREA	<p>Yeah.</p>
NISI	<p>...or mundane fiction. The fiction that tries to be realistic, um, comparing that with a speculative fiction I-, um, what you can do with speculative fiction is you can question the, um, necessity of, uh, institutions that are sort of hard wired into the current moment. You can, um, you can go beyond them and you can imagine something else...</p>
ANDREA	<p>Alternatives.</p>
NISI	<p>...yeah, and if that is escapism, I want more.</p>
ANDREA	<p>Right, I mean yeah, ...and to me fiction is the big category and, memetic fiction is actually, you know, a recent category ...you know, like, again, 19th century. A lot of stuff came out of the 19th century that's very interesting, um so, you know, the idea that you imagine stories is really the big huge idea, um and whether or not they are rea-, uh, possibly real, realism means that this could be real. But realism is often just what we're willing to agree to, right. Just what, you know, the things that go without saying, you know. So, um, again back to those stereotypes – people thought hose were realistic, you know. They thought these are realistic portrayals</p>

	<p>of this group of people - and that's because you're willing to believe it and so if you're not willing to believe it, it's somehow fantastic too imagine, again, the black woman who is a physicist, a code slide and speaks German. That is not realistic... 'cos you're not willing to believe it.</p> <p>And I think science fiction and fantasy messes with what we're willing to believe.</p>
NISI	Yeah...
NYLA	<p>That is, I'm speechless after that answer. That's incredible. I love the idea of thinking of realism as what we agree to believe to. What we agree to believe - that's, yeah, that's really struck me. Um, talking of the title of the book, I know that the title New Suns comes from the Octavia E Butler quote "there's nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns". Nisi, could you talk about why you chose that as the title of the book?</p>
NISI	<p>It just seems perfect for me for what I wanted to do., um, for what I wanted to do in going beyond not just a new world, but a new vision of a, of a world. Um, that's all. It seemed like, to take it up a notch and that's, that's what I wanted to do.</p>
ANDREA	That's what you did.
NYLA	<p>Yes, yeah, definitely. Um, I'm just aware that the time – I think we're; we're coming up to the close soon. So, the theme of this year's Book Week Scotland is future – and, em, as I said before, um, when I was speaking to you both previously, I feel like this anthology speaks on this, eh, seamlessly. We're talking about speculative fiction, we're talking about imagined futures, we're taking about representation in the industry as well which I assume we all hope is a hope for the future. Um, I was wondering if you could both, um, tell me about what you envision and what you hope the future of speculative fiction will look like.</p>
ANDREA	Wow.
NISI	<p>I have, I have, eh, come up with some wild scenarios with this, um, as in – no seriously, okay, 'cos I'm a science fiction writer, you know, so I, I envision like, um, science fiction writers being, uh, the, being completely acknowledged legislators of the world. I envision, um, teams of, uh, imaginers coming together and, um, sort of, having like, creative throw downs like open mic kind of series things where they, um, the one that can come up with the most resonant and moving and beautiful evocation of the future, uh, becomes the one that gets everybody to do that. So, yeah, sorry but that's a little wild but that's where I go.</p>

ANDREA	<p>No, no, no, no, no, so I love that, Nisi. Um, so I was thinking about this too, um, and I was, you know, thinking, um, like, then we centre not he arts so I, I think I was in a similar vein. But right now I feel like the artists are viewed as, like, you know, expendable, you know, escapism fringe, you know, like, you know, for the, you know, like, I don't know, like opium for the masses so they go and they watch a movie and then they're done, um, whereas I want to, you know, somehow have, to me, what I like about science fiction is I can put together science, um, you know, my science perspective, my historical perspective, um, all of my, you know, other artistic things that besides writing. I can put it all together in the science fiction and fantasy novels. So in my novel Master of Poisons, I did all of this research on bees, on trees, on rivers, you know, I did all this economic research, I did all of this stuff and, you know, and then I could put it all together in an artistic mode. And in the book, I have characters trying to get together a group of people to do that, and that's what I thought we needed. So, it's very similar to what you're saying, Nisi.</p>
NISI	Wow.
ANDREA	<p>That, that we get together all the different ways of, um, being and seeing, and feeling, and imagining the world and then we value all of that. We value every perspective so that the artists aren't like grubbing to just, just, uh, you know, survive, you know, that they're, you know, or that scientists aren't ridiculed, um, for, you know, having, you know, to make difficult calls, you know, which is seemingly what's going on right now, you know. But instead, um, that we're in fact talking and being, and moving with one another to make, to conjure the world that we want. And that, to me, is what were we're asking for in all of our stories, you know, like a way to conjure the world we want and so I, I, you know, I'm hoping that hat what we as science fiction and fantasy writers can support.</p>
NYLA	<p>That's phenomenal, em, and feels like a really wonderful, um, point to end the event, em, I'd, I loved this conversation. Thank you so much, both of you – if you're watching this at home, go buy New Suns – you will not regret it. It's a fantastic anthology and just really wonderful. There's such a range of stories here. There's such a range of authors. I think there's something in this book for anyone and everyone. Um, and Christmas is coming, so you know, why not? Eh, um, thank you so much Nisi and Andrea for joining me today, um, this Book Week Scotland event has been brought to you by Scottish Book Trust. Scottish Book Trust wants everyone living in Scotland to have equal access to books because better access to books means better life chances. You can help by gifting a book to a family struggling this Christmas. If you enjoyed this event please consider sharing your love of reading by donating to Scottish Book Trust Christmas appeal at scottishbooktrust.com</p>

	<p>Um, thank you again Nisi and Andrea – it’s been an absolute pleasure talking to you. I think this is such wonderful perspectives and I’d like to thank you again for your time and if you’re watching at home thank you so much for tuning in. I hope you have a wonderful Book Week Scotland.</p>
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