



How did I get here?

Malika Booker: A writing course junkie

Malika Booker is a British writer of Guyanese and Grenadian parentage who writes poetry, plays and solo monologues. Her poems have been anthologised in *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry* (The Women's Press, 1998), *The Fire People: A Collection of Contemporary Black British Poets* (Payback Press 1998), *Ic3: The Penguin Anthology of New Black Writing* (Penguin, 2000) and *Wasafiri*, No32 Autumn 2000. Her first musical play *Catwalk* ran at the Tricycle Theatre in June 2001 and had a successful UK tour. She has represented British writing internationally, both independently and with the British Council including Slovenia, New Zealand, and Azerbaijan. Malika was Hampton Court Palace writer in residence in 2004 and is now a commissioned writer for Croydon Museum. In Spring 2005, she undertook a writing fellowship at The India International Centre in Delhi to work on her first novel. Her latest play, *Unplanned*, opened in Spring 2007 with a run at Battersea Arts Centre. Malika is co-founder of Malika's Kitchen, a writers' collective which has branches in London, Chicago and New York.

An addiction to writing courses

My name is Malika Booker and I am a writer. I started out writing and performing poetry in 1989. In 2000 I began to write and create monologues for the theatre, basically solo one-woman shows. I also wrote a musical play called *Catwalk* and am currently writing my first novel.

My writing career kicked off with a major addiction to creative writing courses. It's strange now that I reflect on that time. I had been writing and performing poetry since 1989. Then I went to Goldsmiths University to study anthropology, a subject I enjoyed very much. However, the last year of my degree was tortuous. There I was, slogging away for exams and writing dissertation papers, whilst my poet friends were performing in venues around the country and had even

begun to tour to places like Amsterdam to do shows. Jealousy and a longing to join them consumed me. By the day of my last exam, I realised the only place for me to work was in the arts, doing anything to facilitate my career as a poet. I was so adamant about this that I refused to claim unemployment benefit or work in any other field until I made this happen. Crazy, my flat-mates at the time were very supportive and did not seem to mind my decreased financial contribution.

Just as I made that bizarre decision, a literature organisation called Spread the Word started up. It seemed a godsend. Here I was living in Brixton and here was this organisation based in Brixton offering literature courses. I got hold of the first brochure and was hooked. Based on my instinctive feeling that I wanted to write, I attended almost every Spread the Word course for about two years.

There was no plan, just this instinctive feeling that as a poet, it was important to learn as much as I could about my chosen field. The other contributing factor is that, apart from job hunting, I had all the time in the world on my hands and really missed studying. So I attended courses such as *Writing The Novel*, *Writing The Short Story*, *Performance Poetry*. I would eagerly await the new Spread the Word brochure and hastily apply for my courses that season before they were booked up. I can literally say I was a writing course junkie.

Little did I know that my addiction would provide the best foundation for me as a writer and a creative writing facilitator throughout my career. It gave me a broad range of skills. Colin Channer's fiction writing course, Sandy Marbly's performance poetry course, Kwame Dawes' Afro-style school, to name a few, all helped to shape me as a writer. I came to understand the importance of reading poetry. I learnt and networked with a great many writers (both participants and tutors) which enabled me to plug into a community of writers immediately. I was also able to study the approach of different tutors to teaching and have since incorporated what I liked into my own teaching style.

Creating a writing community

I feel very strongly that writing is my career choice and chosen profession. It is therefore very important for me to invest in myself as a writer and an important part of this investment process (apart from getting my computer, printer, stationery and building up my personal library) has involved taking writing courses. This is to ensure that I constantly retrain, sharpen and hone my skills. As a result, I see forking out money for the courses that I attend as absolutely essential to my continuing growth and development in this writing field.

Kwame Dawes was, and still is, a big influence on my life and my writing. The older I grow both in age and in this writing lark, the more disciplined I get with regards to crafting and

writing. I can pinpoint most of my development to one main source, Kwame Dawes. He not only revolutionised my thoughts about poetry, he most importantly taught me the importance of creating a writing community in order to harness, cultivate, produce and encourage new writing. It is through his influence that I have worked jointly with Roger Robinson and Jacob Sam-La Rose to develop and co-run Malika's Kitchen, a writers' collective which has been running for four and a half years. In the last two years, a branch has started in Chicago and the New York branch began in December last year.

The aim of the Kitchen is provide a space where writers can develop their craft by writing and learning in a supportive environment. The ethos of the Kitchen is 'there is always room to improve your craft, no matter who you are' – a fact, I feel, that should be at the heart of every writer's creative practice. Malika's Kitchen develops new writing, works on performance techniques and has recently started to publish a quarterly anthology. The Kitchen has also been responsible for introducing numerous new voices into literature.

Every time that I venture into a new area of writing, I am reminded of my foundation as a course junkie because of the novel, poetry and monologue writing books on my bookshelf, most of which were bought for the reading list of a Spread the Word course. It's a bit like – aha, I am writing monologues now and here is a book on my shelf that is coming in handy. But most importantly, as I skim the book to aid me, aspects of the monologue writing course come flooding back.

Learning the business

Fortunately for both my flat-mates and my peace of mind, the poetry organisation Apples & Snakes hired me as their education co-ordinator. My main role was to run their Poets in Education (PIES) scheme. I had to place poets into

educational settings to do workshops. The experience gained in this role was invaluable. I learnt considerably different approaches to planning and implementing poetry / creative writing workshops, particularly in schools.

We were a very small team, so the Programmer, Director and Education Co-ordinator would brainstorm ideas for future Apples & Snakes shows. For five years I attended Apples & Snakes shows regularly, watching a wide range of poets perform. My experience there helped me to become a stronger writer, performer, and workshop leader. It also enabled me to gain an amazing knowledge of my industry as well as build links with literature development workers all over the country.

These links helped me secure a considerable amount of work since being a self-employed writer. I also get a large amount of my work via recommendations. A teacher whose school I worked in would pass my information onto another teacher in another school. I am also very lucky that I had an agent (until recently), renaissance one, who solicited work for me. I am also one of Apples & Snakes PIES poets and this is where the bulk of my work comes from. Once I have a job, I make sure that I complete it to the highest possible standard which usually earns me more work.

Most importantly, I initiate meetings with various organisations at the beginning of the year. This is to let them know what I will be working on all year, what kind of projects I am interested in doing etc. I can then be included in any long term planning but most importantly, if a project comes up that directly relates to my work, I will be considered.

Books that have changed my life

I am also a 'how to' book junkie. This means I am always buying books about the crafting process. As an instinctive learner, it is important

to immerse myself into the writers / writing of whichever genre I am working in. If I am writing a play, I devour hundreds of plays, if it's poems, I read numerous poems, if it's a novel, I consume loads of novels. I try to be current in whatever genre I am working in and absorb the canon.

There are many books that have become a sort of bible. Here are some of the books that have changed my life:

Michael J. Bugeja, *The Art and Craft of Poetry*
Stephen King *On Writing*
Ruth Padel *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*
Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem*
Julia Bell & Paul Magrs, *The Creative Writing Handbook*
Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction*
Roberta Allen, *Fast Fiction*
Toni Morrison, *Sula*
Toni Morrison, *Jazz*
Rani Manicka, *The Rice Mother*
Clare Morrall, *Astonishing Splashes of Colour*
Junot Diaz, *Drown*
Bernardine Evaristo, *Lara*
Sharon Olds, *Father*
Li Young Lee, *Rose*
Carol Ann Duffy, *Rapture*
Sinead Morrissey, *The State of the Prisons*

The best resource that any writer can have other than an impressive library is other writers that they trust to give them great critical feedback on their writing, encourage them and push them out of their comfort zones. I have writers such as Jacob Sam-La Rose, and Roger Robinson, to name a few, who aid me in this way.

Writing Buddies

The next best thing to a great critic is a great writing buddy. Someone who is as serious about writing as you are, a writer you meet with once a week or fortnight to write. I have had various writing buddies over the years, ranging from Patience Agbabi to Patricia Foster. We set goals and check that we are keeping our goals, work

on our individual projects together as well as give feedback on work and make healthy suggestions.

My current writing buddy is Karen McCarthy. We live close to each other so meet up at least once a week to write. I had done various Spread the Word courses with Karen over the years. We both attended the Kwame Dawes course, then three years ago we were on an Arvon course together. Each evening we would go to our adjoining rooms and write religiously. We loved each other's drive, work ethic and the easy way we worked together and made a commitment to becoming writing buddies. We spent a while trying to make it happen and then fate intervened when Karen coincidentally moved into a flat just up the road from me, creating the best case scenario for us to begin writing together, so we met up, set our goals and said 'let's start'. We have been meeting up for over five months now. It's proving to be the most fruitful experience in terms of our work output.

At the moment, Karen and I alternate houses. However, there are great places to write if your home environment is not conducive. Here are some of mine: The British Museum, The Poetry Library, Borders Book shop, the British Library, my local café.

My mission statement

Lastly, I have a mission statement regarding both my writing and performance. I found that when you work for yourself, there is no way to monitor your achievements, making it very easy to drift into different projects, take workshops in schools, get behind in your own writing and two years later you cannot account for what you have done. It is also hard in this kind of climate to maintain a balance between taking work, commissions, performances and workshops to pay the bills / raise your profile and devote the necessary time needed for creating your own work. It is important to my development as a writer that I am always creating new work. I realised that I had to develop a system which

would place my writing output at the heart of my practice. So I read various books about achieving success, looked at various organisational strategies, had discussions with other writers like Roger Robinson, attended a Spread the Word Course run by Bernardine Evaristo called *Debut Diaspora*, where she advocated setting long and short term goals for your writing if you want to take it seriously, and I came up with the following system.

At the end of each year I review my achievements, using this as a basis to brainstorm future developments needed to succeed. Then in January, I review my mission statement, adjusting it if necessary. I then set myself realistic writing goals for the year which feed into my weekly writing schedule. I recently read an interview with the poet Bob Hicok where he stated that due to time limitations, when he sits down to write a poem, he has to finish it in that time period. I have decided to adopt this work ethic for this year and see how it pans out. When you facilitate a considerable amount of workshops in schools, finding time to write becomes limited, so Bob Hicok's approach is heaven sent and so far it's going great.

April 2006

© Malika Booker

Useful links

Apples & Snakes
England's leading organisation for performance poetry – stretching the boundaries of poetry in performance and education.
www.applesandsnakes.org

FYI

A free mailing list run by poet Jacob Sam-La Rose packed with news and opportunities of interest to writers, poets and performers. To subscribe, email fyi-subscribe@metaroar.com

NALD (The National Association for Literature Development)

The only national body for all those involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.

www.nald.org

The National Association of Writers in Education
The one organisation supporting the the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK.

www.nawe.co.uk

The Poetry Book Society

Specialist poetry bookseller and book club which runs poetry education and development projects.

www.poetrybooks.co.uk

The Poetry Library

Collects and lends all poetry published in UK since 1912 and offers comprehensive information service including a free newsletter.

www.poetrylibrary.org.uk

The Poetry Society

Offers advice and information for all, including the critical appraisal service *Poetry Prescription*.

www.poetrysociety.org.uk

renaissance one

A leading organisation for the curation and production of literature and spoken word tours and events.

www.renaissanceone.com

Spread the Word

Works with London writers at every stage of their development to enable them to achieve their full potential.

www.spreadtheword.org.uk

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain

The trade union for professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books and new media. Negotiates minimum terms and practice agreements for writers in TV, film, radio and theatre.

www.writersguild.org.uk

writernet

National organisation that aims to provide dramatic writers with the tools they need to build better careers and redefine the culture in which they work.

www.writernet.org.uk