

Become a Good Ancestor Podcast

Ep 03 In Every Mirror She's Black with Lola Akinmade Åkerström

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

book, Muna, writing, people, Sweden, character, Lola, stories, voice, black women, Kemi, Swedish, culture, women, create, Nigeria, author, travel, feel, Brittany-Rae

SPEAKERS

Lola, Reema, Layla

Layla 00:02

Hello everybody, welcome back to 'Become a Good Ancestor'. We're here for episode three and I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I'm ready to dive into what I'm sure is going to be another amazing conversation with an author of colour. This month, I'm excited because we're reading a fiction book. Today I'm speaking with the author, the one and only Lola. Oh, I just realised I did not learn how to pronounce your name. Lola. Let me just ask you how to say it, then we can restart the recording. How do I say your name?

Lola 00:41

Lola Akinmade Åkerström.

Layla 00:44

Åkerström. Okay, I got the Akinmade. Right. And I was like is Åcerström or Åcarström.

Lola 00:49

Its' Åkerström.

Layla 00:49

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to 'Become a Good Ancestor'. We're here for episode three and I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I'm ready to dive into what I'm sure is going to be another amazing conversation with another author of colour. This month, I'm extra excited because you're reading a fiction book. Today I'm speaking with the author, the one and only Lola Akinmade Åkerström. Lola is an award-winning visual storyteller and international best-selling author and a travel entrepreneur. She has dispatched from over 70 countries and her work has been featured in National Geographic, New York Times, The Guardian, BBC, CNN, Travel Channel, Lonely Planet, Forbes, and many, many more. In 2018, she was recognised as one of the most influential people of African descent in media and culture. Her book, 'Due North', received the Lowell Thomas Gold Award for the best travel book. She is also the author of the international bestseller 'Lagom', although I'm sure I'm mispronouncing it, and it's about the Swedish secret of living well, which is available in 18 foreign language editions. Her debut fiction book,

which we'll be talking about today, is called 'In Every Mirror She's Black (IEMSB)', and is published by Sourcebooks Landmark, and it's our June 2022 book selection in the 'Become a Good Ancestor' book club. To find out more about the book and to join us in the Book Club, please visit www.becomeagoodancestor.com/bookclub. Welcome to the podcast. Lola.

Lola 02:41

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Layla 02:45

We're excited to be having you. This is our first fiction book of the year; we've read two nonfiction books so far. It was good to like to switch up the pace and have a different kind of book. I'm excited to have this conversation with you. I don't want to give any spoilers, but I've finished reading the book, and I messaged the team on our Slack. I was like have you read the book. I immediately wanted to talk to somebody about it the moment that we were finished. I feel privileged I get to speak with you, the author, about it today. Before we dive in, Lola, where can people find you and your work online?

Lola 03:28

Absolutely. I'm quite active on social media. It's @LolaAkinmade, you can find me on all the major social media channels and the book has its own account, @InEveryMirror. You can find that on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Layla 03:48

Excellent. How was my Swedish pronunciation of your other book? Is it like Agom? I'm sure it's not. Lagom?

Lola 04:03

Don't worry about it.

Layla 04:03

Thank you, you're very kind. I ask every guest the same question to kick off our conversation. The question is this. Who are some of the ancestors living or transitioned, societal or familial? Who has influenced you on your journey?

Lola 04:20

That's a great question. The first person who comes to mind is my maternal grandmother because I grew up in Lagos, Nigeria. She was one of the first examples of what it was to be a strong woman standing in power. She was very vibrant for the time she was in. A very strong voice that could not be controlled or "tamed by society". She showed me what it was to be a woman living on her own terms, living, laughing, loving on her own terms, and more ancestors are living now. There are so many, I can't uprise one of them. She's somebody that stands in a power as authentically as you can, uses her voice, and I am a visual storyteller. There are many platforms, to tell stories. There are many ancestors, but my past will be my grandmother just for who she was and what she represented, living will be Oprah.

Layla 05:31

I love that. I love that so much. You alluded to the fact you were born in Nigeria, and I know you were educated in the United States, and are currently based in Sweden. When I read that about you, I felt an immediate affinity to you because I similarly have this very varied background. I was born in Wales, grew up in Wales, Tanzania, and England, and I live in Doha, in the Middle East. My heritage is East African and Middle Eastern. I immediately felt like I would get along with this person who had all of these varied experiences.

Lola 06:25

One thing I wanted to say is that's where you kind of build your own super-culture because you take the best of all the different cultures you've lived in and grown up in. I've taken the best of Nigeria, the US, and Sweden, to create my own values and reality and in the same way, I want to raise my children, and create my own, "super-culture".

Layla 06:46

Yeah, I love that so much. It kind of reminds me of how growing up my dad was a mariner. He always worked at sea, all his life, so he travelled around the world, and he always told us if anybody asked me where I'm from, just say, "I'm a citizen of the world". He was very adamant, and he's very proud of his culture. He was also very adamant not to be boxed in, to be stereotyped in any way, or to be limited in any way as well. When you said super-culture and defining for ourselves who we are, I love that so much. I'm sure one of the questions you get asked a lot, Lola, is where are you from? But where are you really from?

Lola 07:39

Absolutely. It's one of those things I always say is, okay, where is home? Because I've got my room on three different continents, but home is a space where I can exist without actually explaining my existence in that space.

Layla 07:56

Right.

Lola 07:57

So that's what I define as home. It doesn't have to be tied to a country, but instead to a community. Is this a space? Can I fully show up as myself without actually explaining my existence? And that feels like home to me? Yeah, I'm in specific parts of the country in different communities?

Layla 08:18

What draws you? Or where do you find you feel the most sense of home, community, or belonging? What do those spaces look like or feel like for you?

Lola 08:30

Nigeria feels almost like a life source because I grew up there. It's a place where I can always go back and fit in and not have to explain what I'm doing in that space. In the US, I had different communities. I was a rugby player for many years. The communities that are tied to my interest, where I can go again, show up without explaining as a woman in Sweden. I found amazing communities of black women,

women of colour, thriving, trying to carve their own space and use their voices here in Sweden. It is a lot of different elements in each pattern in nature.

Layla 09:23

I love that. A huge part of who you are, like you said, you're a visual storyteller. It's pretty incredible, you're a highly talented and respected photographer. You're also a very accomplished writer in both nonfiction and fiction. Storytelling is what you're here to do, right?

Lola 09:51

Yeah.

Layla 09:51

Tell us about your journey as a storyteller? What were those early seeds that began it and how it blossomed over time?

Lola 10:04

Absolutely. Sometimes I always say the source of your creative voice can be tied to a source of pain. A source of pain, and when I moved from Nigeria to the US at 15, I moved into a new culture with new rules that had already defined the minority for me as a black woman. I was from Nigeria with my own belonging, with my own identity, and I struggled to find belonging. What was my identity in this new space? I was isolated a lot. We usually tend to exclude and isolate what we do not understand it is our basic human nature. A lot of my creative voice came from that isolation. How can I foster cultural understanding? How can I write stories that make us understand each other better, because once we understand each other better, then we isolate each other less, and we discriminate against each other less? That's where my creative voice as a writer came from. It's the same voice that translates into photography. When I photograph people, I try to capture that moment of connection, so that you see them, see them without judging based on their background or the environment.

Layla 11:33

I love that. Was that where you were starting to tap into? Did it begin first with photography? Or was it writing? Or was it just an exploration of many different things?

Lola 11:47

It started with writing first, actually; it started with fiction.

Layla 11:52

Oh, how interesting.

Lola 11:54

It's kind of going back to my first love. This book is going back to my first love, which had always been fiction. I grew up writing and, especially as a teenager; I spent many years writing a lot of short stories filled with books, and was running my own library in my dorm room.

Layla 12:14

Oh, wow.

Lola 12:16

I know, right? People were checking out my stories, but then I got into nonfiction travel writing. But I always wanted to come back to fiction and realised that trying to rewrite some of those stories I wrote as a child with an adult voice was challenging until I realised I hadn't lived them. I hadn't experienced life yet, so I wasn't connecting to the stories. This book was the book I was meant to write at this stage of my life, based on all the experiences I've had until this point.

Layla 12:57

That's incredible, first of all, as a library nerd, I love that you were like, I'm going to set up my own library, write my own books and have my own system. They could check-in and check out books. I love that so much. What were those? What were those early stories about? What were the kinds of topics that you were writing about at that time?

Lola 13:18

They weren't just stories, I would flip through magazines cut out two pictures of people and say, "You know what, I'm going to write a story about this guy who fell in love with this lady". As a teenager writing lots of stories that were maybe too mature for my time than I should have been writing. Actually, there was quite a broad range of stories most of it covered relationships and trying to connect with each other or trying to understand each other. A lot of that I already could tell in those stories I wrote back then.

Layla 14:02

And did you have avid readers who were like, "what happens next?" I want to know, give us another one. When's the next one coming out?

Lola 14:14

They were all my classmates, my colleagues who were reading them and these books were handwritten.

Layla 14:20

Wow.

Lola 14:21

Notebooks upon notebooks upon notebooks and I think it's great because I keep in touch with all those classmates, and they can remember this. It's humbling and I'm grateful.

Layla 14:38

That's fantastic. How did you get into photography then?

Lola 14:43

Photography was a means to an end because I used to be an oil painter. When I travelled, I used to take photos of the places I wanted to paint when I got back. Oil painting was my main thing. I had a company where I was selling my oil paintings with a friend who was a photographer, I was doing a lot of

oil painting. After a while I felt like I was duplicating my efforts, the photos looked fine in their own right. I started using photography and exploring photography as a new medium for expression. That's how I got into photography, and then it complemented the travel writing because sometimes they always say, sometimes when you take a photo you don't need to write anything. Sometimes you have to write because the photo doesn't do the writing justice. It depends and that's why I feel fortunate to be able to switch mediums, based on the story I'm trying to tell. Because sometimes just writing and evoking a sense of place through words can be even stronger than just taking a photo of the place and vice versa. That's how I got into photography.

Layla 16:11

This context is so helpful to have because we're going to talk about your book next and it's very multivariate. It's a book that has several different characters, coming from very different backgrounds, and even the side characters all have very unique backgrounds, and very unique storylines, as well. But I'd like to ask you about your travel writing and what kind of things you write about there. The stories that are accompanying the photos. What is it that you're trying to get across? It seems like connection and relationships are a huge recurring theme.

Lola 16:51

For me, culture drives a lot of what I do. I grew up in Nigeria, which has over 250 different tribes speaking over 500 different dialects, it's very multicultural, and for you...

Layla 17:08

It's a world unto itself.

Lola 17:10

Pretty much for you to be able to drive and live side by side every day while respecting each other is what we do. Especially growing up in Lagos, it means trying to understand different cultures, when I travel the biggest part of travelling is what makes us different, what makes us similar? Why are we different? What are some of those nuances I can understand? if I understand this nuance, then it gets me deeper into the mindset of the culture. A lot of my travel writing has to do with that, I love food, but I love more of the traditional slow gastronomy, food that has history, different lifestyles, whether it's a fisherman, the fishing lifestyle, or artisans that create and craft with their hands. Those traditions, people preserving those traditions. Those are the themes I love to experience and write about in my travel writing. That ties in with all the work I do, even my nonfiction book Lagom, which is really about the Swedish culture and getting innovative in a nuanced way. That's what ties all my work together. Culture.

Layla 18:31

That's fantastic. That makes so much sense because as I was reading these characters who are very different, I was like, she'd managed to capture what felt like a very authentic representation of being from those specific cultures and the nuances and differences. I think your entire background, both your personal but also your work background, allows you to be able to tell the story in that way. We've been talking about the book, let's help people know the name, it's 'In Every Mirror, She's Black'. What is the

book about and what does the title mean? The title is what immediately made me want to know, what is this book about? What does the title mean to you? And what is the book about?

Lola 19:22

The title is about no matter where you go, no matter where I go, as a black woman that's what the world sees first. I'm met with all the stereotypes in the world that have been crafted on my behalf, the narratives the world has crafted on my behalf. Then based on the interactions with me, people start to deduct from those stereotypes. That is such a burden for black women to carry. The point of the title is to say, regardless of Kemi's background, or previous background or a women's background, the first thing you see is their skin.

Layla 20:00

It's their blackness.

Lola 20:00

Just their blackness. But as you read the book, you can see all three women have nothing in common, they are very different individuals. That's the point of the book, to show the kind of this multidimensionality to black womanhood, that even though we face some very similar issues, we're also individuals, and we need the privilege to be treated as individuals, so that when I make a mistake, they don't say, "that's how all black women are". Because then they will like "No, Layla, she's not going to make the same mistake". She's different. That's the privilege of individuality and so that was the point of the book, it was to create three very different women. One that represents class, culture, and career, navigating the predominantly white space in Sweden.

Layla 20:58

Set us up. How when someone asks you, What's the book about? What is the very brief synopsis that you give them?

Lola 21:07

The book is about three different black women. One is a marketing executive Kemi, who gets poached from the US because a powerful Swedish company has had a huge international scandal that was racially insensitive. On the flight, the CEO of the company, Jonny von Lundin meets Brittany-Rae, who's a flight attendant who is tired of serving people and wants to be taken care of, and then gets swept up into his world. Then there's Muna who is a refugee that fled Somalia, lost her family and roots and is trying to create a new life for herself in Sweden. The connection is, that she lands in an asylum centre that was sponsored by Jonny and then ends up as a janitor in his office, and Jonny is the link. I do not centre him in their stories, the stories about the three women.

Layla 22:09

It's incredible. You did it amazingly. These are very three very distinct black women all with their own storyline, that they may be connected through this single person, but have no real connection with each other. Their stories are very unique and individual. What was it that made you want to write these three characters as opposed to three other different types of characters? Like what was it about Kemi, Brittany-Rae and Muna that you were like, I want to tell these stories?

Lola 22:44

Absolutely, there are so many different and many more voices, that need to be told. These are just three of like, 1000s in Sweden. Before I found these women, I knew it had to tackle three themes. The theme of career, class, and culture. Before I knew I was going to create Kemi, I knew I needed to create a career woman, and talk about the difficulties and the microaggressions of what it is to try and drive as a black woman in Sweden, and in Europe in general, because it's very different from the US. Even in Sweden, sometimes you don't even get called for a job interview if your name is not Nordic sounding. I mean, they're still at that level. I wanted to bring a powerful woman into that mix. Then class because it's a very open society and I do love living here but it is still very classist. People ask you where you live, so they can quickly social and economically place you. That's like the right way of saying, "Okay, you live in this neighbourhood", so maybe it's quite classist. It's because it's a very tight-knit community. I call it the most open society run by the most private closed people. It's the most society run by the most private people. Then culture because Sweden has opened its doors to a lot of refugees. There's a difference between assimilation and integration. There are still a lot of integration issues because Sweden wants you to assimilate. When you tell somebody to assimilate, you are saying drop who you are, drop your identity, drop your values to be like us. Whereas integration says, as long as you respect the values, you respect the rules, you can connect, therefore we are going to make space and that's what causes a lot of issues and I knew I needed to tackle this book from those three different angles and that was how Kemi and Brittnay came to this place. The reason why Jonny is in the book is that black women do not move to Sweden without a reason. We do not move. It's true. It's a fact. I'm somebody that travels.

Layla 25:13

Sweden would not be the first choice or even in the top 10.

Lola 25:18

I am confident in this generalisation because the Nordics are not a top location for black women. It's not Spain. It's not Portugal. It's not France. It's not the UK. It's not a place where we might think, "Oh, the culture let me let me go there."

Layla 25:37

I can sort of fit in somehow.

Lola 25:42

Something to bring you as a black woman to the Nordics with the number one reason being love. You meet somebody from the region, so you come. The second reason is actually as a refugee. Then maybe a work transfer or a study abroad programme mostly in Copenhagen. That was why Jonny's character was essential to be created, otherwise, the book wouldn't have been rooted in the reality.

Layla 26:14

That makes a lot of sense. I'm being mindful not to give away any spoilers because there's a lot in the book that I just want people to be able to read. Please join us in the book club. We can read it together and talk about the spoilers together. One of the things which is not such a huge spoiler, as we've mentioned is these three characters. It's not like they come together or have a lot of time together. Why was that important? For them I'm guessing as a black woman, you're not the majority. There's going to be fewer of you and in my mind, as I'm reading, I want them to come together, band together and become friends. I want them to get together and destroy white supremacy together. That wasn't the story that you wrote.

Lola 27:19

Because that's not in reality, especially in the Nordics, yes, there are lots of communities, I have an amazing community of black women where I feel safe. But they also have communities of black women that don't connect because our values are different. We're different and I know a lot of people wanted me to create Charlie's Angels, bonding. With Brittany and Muna there's nothing that would have organically brought them together because Brittany is married to the 1% and Muna is a janitor, who is chubby, wears the job and they're under such a classified culture. There is no way they would have organically connected, there's no way. Then with Kemi and Muna, that relationship was a bit more organic because of the work situation. But Kemi and Brittany also wouldn't have been friends if they were somewhere else. Because Kemi is also a very problematic character. She's very judgy.

Layla 28:39

With that relationship every time they interacted, I was like, oh, Kemi, what are you doing?

Lola 28:47

It's because Kemi is somebody that feels like she has struggled all her life to get where she is. That Brittany is just using her looks to get through life. There's already that judgement coming from Kemi. They wouldn't have been close friends in that sense. I wanted to create something reflecting reality, because one thing I also find insulting to black people is people who say, "Oh, you know what? You're from Nigeria. I met this one person from Nigeria, maybe your friends, you know each other?" Maybe she'd be right, but there are close to 300 million people in Nigeria. I wanted to give space again for women to just be individuals, make mistakes and not be perfect.

Layla 29:42

That was one of the things I realised as I came to the end of the book. What she's written is much closer to what would happen in reality versus what you know, the ideal that I would want to be. That's something to sit with, this is what reality is. Lola, you talk a lot about that in the book, we cover a lot of themes that talk about immune white supremacy as well. Things such as exotification and fetishization and white saviourism, and things like that. What was interesting about the way that you've covered it, is that the readers are left thinking, is it a fetish? Or is it a preference? Is it saviourism? Or is it them just trying to do their best? You don't answer the question directly for us. You leave us to sit with it. Was that something intentional that you were doing as you were writing the book?

Lola 30:49

I mean the book covers a lot of things. They always say debut authors are quite ambitious in that they want to just tackle everything, but that is our lives. Life is messy, life is multi-dimensional, at what point does tokenism become racism, and then sexism becomes you know, it all blends into each other. Then Jonny's character is a symbolic character I created in a specific way because I wanted him to also represent the good meaning of "the blindsided white saviour", who doesn't understand that other people have their own agency, you are not supposed to say, and in a sense, as much as I love Sweden, and I love living here. It does that a lot, where you see all the refugees we've saved, we are the defender of human rights, but then are you giving people a chance to have purpose and meaning in their lives? Once they come here, do they feel welcome? Do they feel like they can integrate? Or do they feel kind of excluded and isolated because they're not fully understood? It's a very complex thing because, on the one hand, you want to do good. But on the other end, the goodness to it can stop somewhere because it's being shown to the world, it has to continue and do the other work. It was easy for her to come in. That's the easy part now. How does Muna...

Layla 32:28

Now the work starts.

Lola 32:30

Okay. She self-actualises fully. That's where the differences are.

Layla 32:38

Muna is a really interesting character, both because we often don't get to read stories about refugees and their experiences. But also, she's younger than the other two characters. She is dealing with the greatest amount of trauma, which is awful, terrible things that have happened to her. But she's also young and she's trying to understand complicated things and trying to find who she is and trying to understand, do these people want me here? Who do I have to be in order to belong here? Talking a little bit about Muna's character because I feel like Kemi and Brittany are a little bit more similar, whereas Muna was quite distinct.

Lola 33:31

Absolutely and there's also a reason why I add all three stories side by side is to also show that suffering isn't an Olympics sport that even though Muna suffers more than Brittany. Brittany has struggles which are also valid in her own right, and so with Muna's character that's the closest to me. Most people always think that Kemi is a career woman. Even though you may know a career woman, Kemi is Nigerian American who moved. It's just me being lazy as an author because it's easy. Muna is closer to me as a person because she represented my 15-year-old self when I moved from Nigeria to the US. Even though it wasn't as a refugee, I can't even begin to imagine the trauma she faced. I was able to pull from a lot of that feeling of isolation and exclusion and feeling like an outsider, and not finding a place and trying to with your voice. That was what influenced Muna's character, and so she's the character that I wanted to also show how important community is because once you find a community, once you find a space where you don't feel like you have to explain your existence, then you can keep them, moving, growing and living.

Layla 35:07

Thank you for sharing that. You've shared this book is about culture, and a lot of your work is influenced by culture. You wrote this Swedish book on culture. I was struck by how, as I was reading it, I was like, and I've not been to Sweden. I don't know what the culture is like there, this was my first time reading a book set there. I feel like that's probably the case for a lot of people. It's the first time reading a book set in Sweden through the perspective of black characters and their experiences of being in that space. It felt like this space was both an Eden and a prison. It was this wonderful, idealistic place, but was also very suffocating and lonely. I think that's the word that comes through really, really lonely. I know the book is set in Sweden, and you're based in Sweden. I don't think this experience of feeling both accepted and not accepted is limited to Sweden. White supremacy shows up differently in countries, in white-majority countries around the world. What has been your experience of living there? What things did you want to bring into the book to be able to share with us?

Lola 36:40

Absolutely, it's everything you said about that. Being very open, yet feeling very isolated. Each time I travel, I keep getting met with a one-dimensional image of Sweden, where it's perfect. It's blondes and Volvos.

Layla 36:58

It's Ikea.

Lola 36:59

Ikea. Those are amazing things about Sweden too. But I'm also a black woman in Sweden, and Sweden also has 25% of the culture of people who have roots somewhere else. But we don't see that globally. To kind of offset all the press, I give Sweden as a travel writer, I've written a lot about the country, and still do because I love it. But I'm also a black woman. I battle microaggressions daily, it's not as easy for me to fully self-actualize as if I was living in the US, it's easier for me to actually self-actualize as a black woman there, but it's hard work. What I wanted to do was paint a more complete picture because one of the things that Europe and Europeans like to say is that we don't see colour and bad things somewhere else. This book is to show that, that's what you said, and I love that you said that. This could apply anywhere else and is not limited to Sweden.

Layla 38:13

Yeah

Lola 38:13

Exactly, that's the point. It also shows it happens in Sweden. You cannot say this doesn't happen. That's one of the things which in Europe things don't happen. One of the issues is it boils down to acknowledgement. When you say you do not see colour, then that means you're not acknowledging what makes me different, and my different needs. It's a lack of acknowledgement. If I don't see your colour, then as a human I don't fully acknowledge what you bring, that's different to the table. The book is very layered, and two things can exist. I always say that the US we all know, it's kind rife with racial tensions. But there's also Yosemite National Park, it's beautiful. Two things can exist and the problem we see in Europe is it tries to push the one-dimensional image and not fully accept that things aren't perfect. That's what makes us vulnerable, when we actually say, "I am fantastic at all these things, but I

could also learn as I don't know everything." Isn't that what creates a connection, human connection when we show each other our humanity and our vulnerability, that's vulnerabilities. To show us as perfect as well. That's what connects people. It's a very complex book.

Layla 39:57

What I was going to say is, that it's a complex book, in the sense that there are three different stories, and as you said, you're tackling many different issues. What I appreciated, though, is that it's written in clear language, and it's very accessible. It never felt like I don't know to read this book, it was very easy to follow the three different storylines. It's well written, and I think it's often harder to write simply because you stop trying to impress people. It's a book that tells the damn story.

Lola 40:38

It was actually a choice by design because I've written for many publications. I've got books and those books feel more like literary fiction, especially in my book about my travels. It's very visual and visceral but this book has a story to tell. I do not want to cushion the story with flowery prose, because at the end of the day, people that need to read the book are going to remember my prose and say, "Oh, she could turn a phrase", instead of remembering the lives of the women, which is the important thing. It was actually by choice because I started writing as literary fiction then I stopped and said, no, this needs to be written in really tight, sharp prose so that you remember the women. Somebody recently said this, where we call them African aunties that always criticise you. They are unfiltered, they don't care about your feelings, and they just tell you. Somebody said they felt like this book was like an African auntie that didn't care about your feelings and just kept disappointing you every time. I thought it was quite true because those African aunties make you unsure if they are complimenting or reprimanding you, they are direct and don't care.

Layla 42:17

This is how I felt when I got to the last page, and I literally just wanted to throw the book away. I was like, Lola damn it, I want to fight you. Then I was like, thank God, you included a reading guide and a section called conversation with the author. I'm so glad you included that because I needed some closure because I needed to speak to Lola, I needed to understand why she just did this to me. Did you know upfront that you needed to include something at the end for your readers?

Lola 42:52

I did know I needed to share more context because sometimes when people go into a living experience, they may not know what I the author brings to that. For example, Muna, and Ahmed. I'm not giving anything away, but I spent two years at an asylum centre working on a photography project with asylums in Sweden. I will go out and set up a studio, take some nice fun shots of them against a blue background, and then come back and print it out. They could take it digitally, so they had something to hold onto. I did that for two years. I spend time talking to a lot of people from Syria, Afghanistan and everywhere and met characters that inspired some of the characters in the book like Ahmed. I met a Kurdish guy that inspired Ahmed, and some of the things he said to me and people like Muna. I needed to create a context. I talked about Swedish quotes I came across called "depressed wells can also be drained". That's what I needed to give that quote, justice because black women are depressed wells in society. We all pull, pull and pull from endless resources of strength, but we're also

human. We need to be taken care of mentally, emotionally, and physically. I needed to write that conversation with an author to give more clarity on why I wrote the book the way I did.

Layla 44:34

I'm glad you did, and you allowed me as a reader to throw the questions back to me. Why did I need neat answers and complete closure, and all of that? Instead, you invite the reader to sit with the questions because that's life. You did a phenomenal job. Thank you. I want to bring somebody on now. Our wonderful brand-new book club facilitator who was with us during the 'Good Ancestor' and has transitioned with us to 'Become a Good Ancestor', Reema Zaman. Reema, you can turn your camera and microphone on. Hi, Reema.

Reema 45:27

Hello. Hello. Well, I...

Layla 45:30

such a pleasure for you to be here.

Reema 45:33

It's an honour, not pleasure.

Layla 45:36

I want to give a quick introduction to Reema. Some of you may recognise her, she was actually on the podcast when it was called the 'Good Ancestor' podcast and we got to have a wonderful conversation about her memoir. 'I Am Yours'. I have loved Reema ever since and was delighted when she joined our team as our book club facilitator, she has been leading book club discussions on Patreon for our members and leading our Fireside Chat with our authors. It's such a joy to have her and I'm so glad to know her personally. I'm so glad that she is part of Team Good Ancestor. Thank you and welcome Reema, and Reema's here in her capacity as book club facilitator to ask some book club type questions to our author, and to get everyone excited to join the book club and to join the discussion. I'll hand over to you now Reema.

Reema 46:34

Thank you so much, Layla. It is such an honour and pleasure to be here and to be part of our amazing community. It's such an honour and pleasure to be speaking to you, Lola. I've just been enamoured with everything you two have been discussing. I have copious notes for what I want to bring to our book club during June, your month. Thank you. I feel like you already did an excellent job of answering the questions prepared and that's great. We're going to go even deeper now. I have two questions for you. They were more about the literary journey you went through as a writer. When crafting this rich fabric book, the three distinct women are so distinct. As a fiction author, as well, I know how difficult that is, and you make it look seamless, which also means there was so much work happening in the background. You already mentioned that initially, you started writing as literary fiction, then you stopped, and you said, I'm going to let the flowery prose get out of the way. These women can just speak most straightforwardly, similarly, did you go through any kind of transformation or exercise to identify, develop, and hone in on the three distinct women?

Lola 48:02

Absolutely, absolutely.

Reema 48:03

Was that difficult to come into? Or how many drafts? What did you do?

Lola 48:07

Absolutely. Great question. I spent the first four to five months before actually writing the book and working on the characters. I was just outlining, identifying, saying, okay, these are the people I would like, this is what she feels like, this is what she will do. This is what she will say. By the time I actually started writing the very first dirty draft, that took four months and I had known the characters so well by that time. That when I put them in a situation, the characters just write themselves because you know them like people that I know if I put them in the situation, this is how she'll react, and this is what she'll say. If I put Muna in the situation, this is what she will do and react. I spent four to five months just on the character building, figuring out places and personalities and quirks and things I wanted to bring into their worlds before actually writing the book.

Reema 49:07

I love it and I love also how you brought in little pieces of yourself like Lagom in the Swedish class. You're not too little, not too much but just right. I'm from Bangladesh originally and we have a similar word, I guess mantra or mindset which is *andaaje*. This means the same thing not too little, not too much but just right. I love that you also placed pieces of yourself into the different women's worlds if not directly into their personalities but into the fabric of their worlds.

Lola 49:41

Absolutely, one thing I did want to say without giving anything away. I use a lot of my experiences with the lives of the women from some of the places that I have lived to a specific flight route I take all the time so it's a specific club, music club, all of those things are kind of within my circle within my experiences. Even though none of the experiences mirrors mine that way I was able to sprinkle a lot of things, I love things, just sprinkle them across all the characters.

Reema 50:21

I love it. That's why it feels so grounded and authentic because these are technically fictional women, but they're grounded in reality. Especially I think their choices made so much sense to me even the choices where I could see the foreshadowing of what may happen. I also understood I had empathy for every single one of the choices. Thank you for that. You say that it's not literary fiction, maybe perhaps in a stylistic manner, but it's got the depth and gravitas of literary fiction, I applaud you for that.

Lola 50:58

Thank you. Thank you.

Reema 51:00

I have another question about the complexity. You mentioned how one of the things you say is that two things can exist? And I say something similar, which is two things can exist as two truths can be true at once. I loved that you found those contradictions and dichotomies, and each one of these complex characters and the character I identify and empathise with most deeply was Brittany. I also found myself really understanding and identifying with the layered toxicity of that relationship she has with Jonny, and I think you did a masterful job with him. He could have become a two-dimensional trope, just a white saver that we loath. I appreciate that even though of course you don't centre him, you centred the three women. I also found myself empathising, with his needs and choices, even the ones that I found egregious. This, again, is because you're a masterful writer and storyteller. Thank you. My question is, and I have 100, but I'm limiting it to two specific ones. The second question is, which character came most easily to you? And which was the most difficult? Or who did you struggle with most?

Lola 52:27

Brittany was the most difficult character for me to create because as a person Brittany and I don't have the same or similar values. But Brittany is valid, and she's allowed to exist without explanation, and she's allowed to want what she wants. This is a woman that has been serving others for over 20 years, she's tired of serving, she wants to be taken care of. Plus, she never dealt with trauma from our past. While it's very difficult for us to deal with trauma, it can be patterns we repeat. I'll stop there without giving anything away. Brittany was a difficult character to create. Kemi was me being lazy, as I mentioned I'm also a career woman. I'm Nigerian-American. I can root her in those things quickly because I experience a lot of them. I can even look at myself and say how can I describe Kemi. She looks like me. But Muna I think even though you know Muna is Muslim I am Christian, and I don't have a deep connection within the Somali community. I wanted to create a connection with Muna she was the easiest character for me to write as a person because I was writing her without being defined by anything else by our community, by religion and by what she's supposed to do. I wrote that as an innocent naive child trying to find a place in the world, and so I think Muna was the one that was easier to write from that feeling because I felt a lot of that. With Jonny, I didn't want to just create a stereotypical white guy that's entitled and which in many ways he is, but I wanted to make it more nuanced and complex because life is not black and white with a bad white guy. We black women are good. It's not that he is a very complex character and by design, I wanted to also normalise some things about him as well, but also show what unchecked privilege can be like. I wanted to create super complex characters because that is what life is, not just black and white and clear cut.

Reema 55:13

You did an incredible job. Thank you. Thank you.

Layla 55:18

What's just struck me actually about Jonny is as you're talking about this is a lot of the family dynamics, he had going on mirrors a lot of the family dynamics you might see in an African or Asian family. Expectations and what will other people think and the like. I don't know if that was intentional, but that's what I've just realised as you were talking.

Lola 55:45

That's the point because I spend a lot of time deep-diving into cultures when I travel. In my work, I'm trying to show how similar we all are. Even though we think we're so different, we want the same things and were affected by many of the same things. The family dynamics are there, and what will neighbours think, this happens in different cultures. I wanted to write a book that was real. I don't know if you noticed, or if you know anything about the publication journey for this book. But it was a struggle to get this book published. We had over 70 rejections, nobody wanted to touch this book. Oh, nobody wanted to talk to us.

Reema 56:31

Because it's so audacious, and it's so brazen, straightforward.

Lola 56:36

We still don't have a Swedish publisher, because most of the Swedish publishers also rejected the book, the biggest one said if you can cut out section sections of my story, and tone down your voice, we can publish it. The Swedish audience, we think they might not like it.

Layla 57:05

Which just proves your point.

Lola 57:09

The book is pretty much proven its points, the longer we go without a Swedish publisher. It's been an incredible journey to get this book to publication. But it also is what I tell people to stick with your truth with your voice and don't back down because the world will want you to dilute your voice, to dilute your story, to dilute your truth so that it's more palatable for others. Don't do that, and I'm grateful I didn't.

Layla 57:44

Thank you for sharing that with us, Lola. This comes to the very heart of our mission with the podcasts and the book club. What we believe about supporting BIPOC authors and authors of colour and making sure that every type of story that wants to be told, we should not only have to write about certain things in order for it to be seen as valid, which goes to the root of what you're saying. 'In Every Mirror She's Black', thank you for sticking with it and for being committed and true to your voice and allowing this book to finally come out into the world, it must feel so sweet and so good to finally have it out.

Lola 58:34

Sweet that I didn't have to compromise a lot to get it. I stuck through it. That it came out the way it was supposed to come out with the original intention and that is what I'm grateful for. That's what is resonating and getting people to feel and getting people to check their own prejudices as well. I'm grateful for the journey of this book.

Reema 59:14

It means you've created a book that is a piece of your legacy, as opposed to the silencing of your voice, and you're honouring your ancestors in this. You're carrying out their work and vision of you.

Lola 59:27

Thank you. Thank you, when you frame it that way, it's humbling and just soul-stirring. Thank you. Thank you.

Layla 59:35

I love that. That's a perfect place to close. I'm going to ask you our very last question, Lola, what does becoming a good ancestor mean to you?

Lola 59:47

I think Reema worded it perfectly for me.

Lola 59:52

It's showing up as fully as I can. To show the sky is big enough for all birds to fly and that me showing up as something else is kind of robbing the future generation of inspiration, a role model of living outside boxes. For me being a good ancestor is really to fully show up as myself and live my truth, to inspire others to do the same. To say that you know what society cannot box me in that I am going to be the one to create the limits on myself. I will always show up and fight any kind of limitations or upper ceilings or boxes or pre-crafted narratives that society tries to do on IEMSB. Just really fully showing up as myself.

Layla 1:00:51

That is beautiful. Thank you so much. Thank you Reema, and thank you, Lola, for this incredible conversation.

Lola 1:00:57

Thank you so much for having me. The honour is mine. Thank you.

Reema 1:01:01

Thank you, Lola. Thank you, Layla.