Writing Durham 3 – Gillian Allnutt and Kayo Chingonyi

Introduction *You're listening to a podcast by New Writing North.*

Laura McKenzie When we think of County Durham, we envision miners' strikes and a Norman Cathedral, St. Cuthbert's Shrine with its headless statue, a post-industrial northern landscape, and a world-leading university. It's steeped in history, but we don't tend to talk about County Durham in terms of its literary significance. I'm on a mission to prove that there's more to Durham than meets the eye; that, alongside its medieval city and worked-out pits, the county is home to a rich and varied tradition of literature. Over the past few months, I've been seeking out the writers, books and poems that tell the story of County Durham's literary past and present. And in this podcast series, I'll be speaking to authors and poets who either hail from Durham, or have made it their home. What does it mean, if anything, to be a Durham writer? What role has this place, unique in so many contradictory ways, played in shaping their work?

Gillian Allnutt has published nine major collections and was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2016. She was born in London but spent half of her childhood in Newcastle, and settled permanently in Esh Winning in County Durham in the 1980s. Kayo Chingonyi is a poet, literary critic and essayist. His latest collection, *Kumukanda*, won the 2017 International Dylan Thomas Prize and a Somerset Maugham Award. He lives in Leeds, and is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Durham University. Like Gillian, he spent some of his childhood in Newcastle. Gillian and Kayo joined me to talk about their work and how their shared experience of leaving, and then returning to, the North East has influenced their poetry.

I'm Laura McKenzie, and this is Writing Durham.

Kayo Chingonyi I was born in Zambia; lived there until I was six. I moved to the UK when my mum was studying at this university.

Laura McKenzie At Northumbria?

Kayo Chingonyi Yeah. So everything's full circle, it seems like.

Laura McKenzie That is funny, isn't it?

Kayo Chingonyi But yeah, she was studying here, and it was intended to be, like, a course of study that she then left, and came back to Zambia. But my – well, it was a complicated situation in which my parents both broke up, and then my dad died. So there was a need for her to come and find me, and take me to where she was. And so that meant coming to Newcastle and living here for three years, I think we did. So I went to school here and made lots of friends and things like that, and very much associate this as a home place. And then after that we moved, because of my mum's work, to London. But we would come back quite frequently, in one way or another, because of the friends and things that were made here. I used to have a pen pal, who – his family lived kind of near to Wallsend. So we were in touch for some while after that. And then I suppose I started to come back to the place myself, when I was at university. I went to university in Sheffield, and trains were much cheaper then. And one weekend I just took myself to Newcastle and since then I've been coming back quite frequently for one reason or another. So it's been one of the places that I spend quite a lot of time, really. And then with working in Durham, it's been a kind of completion of the circle, somehow, if such a thing is possible, just because I've always been drawn to the North East and like, decided to go to Holy Island on a holiday out of season one year, because that was what I thought would be fun.

Laura McKenzie What was that like?

Kayo Chingonyi It was very difficult to get across the causeway so that – once we got across the causeway, which was, you know...

Laura McKenzie Half the battle.

Kayo Chingonyi I don't recommend it. I don't recommend it. We took a bus a long way, and then we took another bus and waited between buses for about two hours in the rain. So I don't recommend it.

Laura McKenzie It sounds like a classic Northumbrian holiday, actually.

Kayo Chingonyi But once we made it, it was wonderful. And those resonances are very, very rich whenever I'm in Durham, because as a child I spent lots of time there and it kind of opens up the whole North East, really, once you move through that countryside you start to enter a kind of different terrain and texture that continues all the way up to Scotland, for me, and is very rich and formative. So yeah, I feel I'm back where I'm supposed to be, somehow.

Laura McKenzie Cause you spent some of your childhood in Newcastle and now you are based in Esh Winning, which is in East Durham. When did you go back to Esh Winning, and what brought you to that village in particular?

Gillian Allnutt What brought me to the village of Esh Winning was my declaring to various friends that I thought I'd like to buy a house I could afford and one in the country. And it was Jackie Litherland who said, "Have you considered Esh Winning?" And one Sunday afternoon, I was living in Brancepeth Castle at the time, and I took my bicycle – I walked my bicycle – over the ridge between Brancepeth and Esh Winning, and I walked about in the village of Esh Winning. I walked past the terrace where I have now lived for the last 25 years. And there was a for sale sign on my house. And I looked, and the voice in my head said, "That's my house." And then I went back to Brancepeth. I forgot all about it. And a few days later, I was very depressed, just because I'm like that, and I thought, "What can I do to get out of this depression?" And I thought, "Oh, I'll go to the estate agents and ask the price of the house." So I did and took it from there.

Laura McKenzie It's a good solution, I would say.

Gillian Allnutt And everyone, everyone who came to my house who had known me before said, "Oh, this is your house." So it was like that.

Laura McKenzie It was meant to be.

Gillian Allnutt Hm-mm.

Laura McKenzie That's interesting. So was it, that in itself felt a bit like a homecoming, I suppose?

Gillian Allnutt Yes. But when I came back to the North East from London in 1988, I never thought of it as a coming home, or coming back, although I had spent eight years of my childhood in Newcastle. But when I *got* back, I thought, "Well, of course it is. How could it not be?"

Laura McKenzie So you both feel there's an element of – like you say, the circle can never be really completed – but of coming full circle?

Kayo Chingonyi Yeah, I think so. I think there's something – something some friends of mine have said, in relation to having any kind of Scottish accent, is that it's very prominent if you live in London. And it disappears when you go back to whatever place that accent is from. And for me, like, the Geordie accent that I had kind of dissipated, but the resonances of the accent were still there, and I missed them without knowing it. And so there's a level of kind of feeling like a place accepts you, or that you belong there, when you hear the language spoken as you're used to it being spoken. And whenever I'm in any part of the North East, that particular texture is very... it just makes me feel calm. You know, in a way that London speaking doesn't. There is a richness to the different kinds of English in London, which I really love, and I find a lot of power in it. And also, it's very inspirational to my work. But I think without this part of the country, there's a way in which some of the things I do in my poems wouldn't be possible.

Laura McKenzie In what way? Could you elaborate on that?

Kayo Chingonyi Um, I feel as if I came to the English language kind of from the outside rather than the in, so there were certain things that I would say, or that I say now, which are not necessarily how a native English speaker would phrase things, because I was taught English

in Zambia. And when you're taught English in that way, it's very focused on getting things correct, I guess. And I think learning English in a more informal way, it's not about being correct so much as communicating well, in a manner that's both illustrative, entertaining, witty... those kinds of things. So I think that all comes into play when you're trying to render something in poetry, because you have to balance the different Englishes in your head in order to arrive at something compelling to someone else.

Laura McKenzie Do you feel that the North East accent or dialect has emerged in your work in any way, or had any impact on it?

Gillian Allnutt Well, when I lived here as a child in the 50s and 60s, you got a better job when you grew up if you talked BBC standard Received Pronunciation English. And to the extent that, as a joke, at home in my family we would go around the table doing the alphabet: "ABCD mustn't say it F G", because everybody said "Ee". And you didn't in London where we came from, and where we would get good jobs, so it was alien. But I went to La Sagesse first, and it was okay to talk like this. But then I passed the 11 Plus and went to Rutherford, and I had to have two languages: a Geordie language for school and an ordinary language for home. So to me it was rather than an alien thing that I mustn't be drawn into. When we went back South to Dorking, everyone at school thought I was Irish, because what we had picked up was the lilt, the singsong, which actually is lovely, I think.

Laura McKenzie Yeah, I've heard that before. Ben Meyers actually said exactly the same thing. When he moved to London, everyone thought he was Irish. Yeah, there's something – I mean, 'cause I grew up in Northumberland and went to school in Newcastle. And I know when I call callcentres now, and people are specifically hired because of the Geordie accent or they're based in Newcastle, and I'm always like, "Oh, ee, hiya!' And it comes up. And it's just a – there is an element when you say comedy, there's something warm and... not humorous, but just, I don't know. It's a nice feeling, I think encompassed in an accent. But then of course, the Durham accents and the southern accent and the Teesside accent and the Geordie accent proper are all different.

Gillian Allnutt Geordie is much nicer than Durham. Durham has a flatness, I think. But when I first came back, I remember writing a poem that begins with the line, “Always I’d one leg longer than the other.” And I thought, “That ‘I’d’, that’s Geordie. I must be turning into a Geordie.” Because it wasn’t a word. It wasn’t a dialect word, it was a grammatical construction, I suppose.

Laura McKenzie Well, even the dialects words are different throughout the region, which I think is, or apparently it’s to do with, the Old Norse or the Norse settlements being more concentrated in the south of the North East. So in Teesside and West Northumberland, that’s words like ket, and beck, like ket for sweets, which I used to say when I was little, but we don’t have those in Tyneside, or it’s more Scots, I think.

Kayo Chingonyi Yeah, there is – I love the thing of calling a child a bairn. There’s a real tenderness around it, which – I do use that for my nieces and nephews occasionally, because of that tenderness that it carries for me. And really, it feels like the right word in some type of way. And I know what you mean about that kind of slippage between different ways of saying a thing, and there might be one that you had, when you were younger, that you then lose, and then you might hear it again. And that feeling is kind of brought back again. Yeah, the kind of words that I learned in Newcastle are really like that for me. Even when I hear someone who doesn’t otherwise have that accent, but then one of the words kind of is a tell, that is a wonderful moment of recognition for me.

Gillian Allnutt I spent ages when I came back, thinking, “Am I a Southerner in the North, or a Northerner in the South?” And then I went back to a college reunion in Cambridge, and I opened my mouth and it came out right. And I thought, “*This* is where I learned how to talk”. It’s very interesting hearing – you said the North East of England is the bit of England you came to first. And so it’s home. It’s yours.

Kayo Chingonyi Yeah, I think so. It’s the place where the English language started to live, in the sense of being something more slippery and less, less textbook, I suppose.

Gillian Allnutt Yes.

Kayo Chingonyi Yeah, and that living quality is what makes me want to write, really? So. Yeah, there is a strong sense of belonging to the place that comes from living here first, I think.

Gillian Allnutt Yes, because for me, it was the second place I lived, and we were strangers. And in the 1950s, 300 miles was 10 hours in the car, six hours on the train. It was another country really. And the class distinctions were so strong. And even when I came back in 1988, it took me three months to understand what was so different from the south and from London. And it was that class was still really important.

Laura McKenzie More important, up here or down?

Gillian Allnutt Up here. In my terrace we were involved in fighting several planning applications, and I found the planning committee meetings at Durham City Council absolutely fascinating, because the councillors were from the inner city: middle-aged, middle-class women. And from the villages, they were old, working-class men, and just the mixture, the conversation – you know, the exchanges that happened were riveting.

Laura McKenzie The mix in Durham, as well – I know there is that tension, obviously, between the university and the town proper, which isn’t always a positive one. And then you have the World Heritage Sites versus the pits. A lot going on...

Kayo Chingonyi And the prison.

Laura McKenzie And the prison, yeah.

Gillian Allnutt But the people love the cathedral.

Laura McKenzie Yes.

Gillian Allnutt And that is wonderful, I think. That seems to be a complete consensus. And I love the way the Gala – even though it's only a heritage thing now, and I just caught it when it was still real, when I moved there – that's so extraordinary, that it's the procession with the brass bands, followed by the political rally, followed by the service in the cathedral. And I went once to the whole thing, and it was Arthur Scargill giving the sermon and it was quite amazing.

Laura McKenzie But the Gala, as well, like you say, is something different now. I was thinking about *Kumukanda* and initiation. And I was thinking, "What initiations are particular to this place?" and I think about going to my first Gala, and that being something just, I don't know, entering into a completely new space, a new experience, and it being a very Durham, you know, this is the Durham thing you've been initiated into. And then I was reading about the Bevin Boys, the miners who got conscripted during the Second World War to – not to fight. They'd all been trained to be pilots or servicemen, and they ended up, I think they just literally picked names out of a hat, and they had to stay and work in the mines. And they called the first descent they took into the mine in the lift the 'initiation drop', because all the established miners would make it, I think it might be 30 feet a second, but it would be 70 feet to the second just to initiate them into that experience.

Kayo Chingonyi Durham is a wonderful space of initiation to the North East, in relation to its landscape on the one hand, but also you have to, if you step off the train, you really have to enter into the dynamics of the place. It kind of takes over your... it's not been made easy for you to get down the hill and everything else. And I think about the way stations are designed now, that is very accommodating. And I really love that in order to properly experience it, you begin by looking around what's there. And it's a similar thing with Newcastle, with the massive bridge. But I think that starting with looking is really useful, because you get a sense of the scope of the place; of what it looks like. And then you enter into its atmosphere. And I really have always loved that about Durham. That walk from the station, to the station from work, is one of my favourite kind of parts of my day, really, because there's a sense in which I bump into the other aspects of Durham life by having to go that way. There is no neat way that I can do it. There's no way I can really have a shortcut from it. And I think that's, yeah, that's an

important part of entering into this part of the country too, because of Durham's history. It's so old, like there's nowhere quite that has this much history in such a small space.

Laura McKenzie Because you worked at the university for a period of time as well, didn't you?

Gillian Allnutt Yes, I must say I felt – not having been part of the university for most of the time I've been on the edge of Durham, and Durham being my city – at the time when I was working at university I felt I could swan about Durham, in a way that I didn't before and haven't since.

Kayo Chingonyi It lends a kind of comical assurance to activities to in any way mention an affiliation or connection to the university to somebody from Durham, or even from Newcastle. I've been in a couple of taxis where they've asked me what I do. And then we've had the long conversation, and then they might ask me why it is I'm going to the university and then finally we get to talking about it. And there's always this perception of it as being this posh, rarefied place, which is very funny. I think there's a way in which you can kind of run with that, in a way, because of that prestige, mystery, whatever that it carries. Which I don't think is quite the same with the universities in *this* city. Perhaps because of that age and history as well.

Laura McKenzie I think the collegiate system, as well, plays into that.

Gillian Allnutt Whereas I, in my village, I'm always trying to play down that side of my life. But I have to say, when I got the Northern Rock Foundation Writer's Award in 2005 and got put on the news, on the local news, a lot, one of the most enduring wonderful things was that the village was so pleased. Because Esh Winning gets a pretty bad press on the whole as an old pit village, and I became the village's pet poet. And because I'd said in various interviews I didn't have a washing machine because I like washing by hand and it helped me to write my poems, which is absolutely true, for years afterwards I was asked in the street, "Have you still not got a washing machine?"

Laura McKenzie And have you still not got one?

Gillian Allnutt Well, actually, I've now got one which I relieved a friend of and I still haven't had it – I've had it since January and not got it plumbed in yet, but I will. That was just something that really touched me that people were so pleased. Yeah. Yeah. So I hadn't expected it at all.

Laura McKenzie Because you've got a couple of poems about Esh Winning.

Gillian Allnutt Mm-hm. So I wrote this soon after I'd moved into my house in Esh Winning at the end of 1993. And this was my first summer, and the garden was a bit of a jungle. And I wanted to be out in it in the evenings, but it was a very cold summer, and I did a great deal of digging in order to be outside in the long, light evenings and keep warm. And at the time I was thinking about my family, and particularly about my grandmother. My mother's brother was killed during the Second World War. He was a navigator in a Lancaster bomber and killed when the plane was coming back from an air raid over Pilsen in the Czech Republic. The plane was shot down over France and the whole crew were killed. And apparently my grandmother sat up in bed in the middle of the night and said, "Something's happened to John." And then after that she sat for three weeks in her chair in a sort of catatonic fit. This is just what my mother told me, but it was really a terrible thing. So I'm thinking about her.

> **Gillian Allnutt [reading] '**In the garden in Esh Winning': Go then into the unfabricated dark with your four bare crooked tines, fork, and get my grandmother out of that muddle of dock and dandelion root and put an end to neglect while the wind says only Esh EshiIn the late apple blossom, in the ash and all the hills rush down to Durham, where the petulant Prince Bishops dream in purple vaults. It's not the Earth's fault, fork, but mine, that I, for 40 years of days and nights, invented dragons to guard my grandmother's bare arthritic bones from my own finding. Now of all things, I imagine a garden laid over and dumb as a disused coal mine. In the north, there are no Salley Gardens, no, nor bits of Willow Pattern plate to plead for me. No, only bones unmourned, the memory of the memory of a plane shot down and it's discoloration. Who now humbly brings me my grandmother in pieces, like Osiris, fork? Who eases out

> old sorrel gone to seed, old scallions? Who pulls the purple columbines out of the not-quite-dark midsummer midnight. In the north, the sky is green. The long grass, partly shorn, lies down like a lion. And something's happened to John. And in this valley of discoloured bones, Ezekiel lies open to the wind, the fork work done. The Bible, propped like an elbow on the ironing board within the house, is full of visions Gran, of what we are, were, always might have been.

Kayo Chingonyi I was thinking, in relation to your work, about how there's a lot of space for readers or for interpretation. It seems to me very dynamically engaged in conversation and also it's a kind of invitation as well. I find that particularly moving in the context of a remembrance like that poem carries. Yeah, I just wondered about how you balance those impulses: the impulse to remember and memorialise with the impulse to communicate and include somebody for whom that memory is not readily accessible, but somebody who needs more information in order to feel about that memory what you do.

Gillian Allnutt I mean, I hope that the feeling that I have put into the poem, not deliberately, but that is in the poem, is the direct link with another person. So, it's a feeling to feeling communication, and then the details, hopefully, don't matter that much. I was thinking about your work, and I mean, there's a couple of poems in *Kumukanda* that I really like. One is the love poem, is it 'Under Cover of Dark'?

Kayo Chingonyi 'In Defence of Darkness'?

Gillian Allnutt Sorry.

Kayo Chingonyi No, that's fine.

Gillian Allnutt Cut that bit out. [laughter]

Kayo Chingonyi
I like 'under cover of dark', it's playfulness is...

Gillian Allnutt Well if I remembered it in that way it wasn't deliberate? It's because I don't want to shuffle about trying to find it. But I hope you might read that one. And also the last one, very little short one that ends the book.

Kayo Chingonyi Oh, yes. I know the one you mean.

Gillian Allnutt About being an orphan.

Kayo Chingonyi 'For Those Orphaned Late in Life'. Yeah.

Gillian Allnutt That one, when I got to that one, I thought there's a poet here. I mean, you know, not that I dismiss the rest of the book – I love your book – but it was that poem because I couldn't explicate it to myself. I could not put into words what I think is so amazing about it. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Kayo Chingonyi Thank you.

Gillian Allnutt Yes. I was thinking exactly – I'll tell you, in your third verse: "coconut oil, laundry detergent, sweat, dry shampoo, Burberry Weekend, garam masala tang in the troublesome hair inherited by our possible daughter". And I thought, that's an amazing list of ordinary scents and smells, and they earth this poem for me. They make it part of the real, the everyday, the ordinary, in the best sense. And yet, they're not my details. I haven't. I haven't much idea what some of these things are, and I certainly can't smell them. But that absolutely doesn't matter. What I do is replace them, probably not consciously, but I know I can replace these smells with similar smells of my own and it really doesn't matter that the details are so different, because they're the same, in essence.

Kayo Chingonyi So when you're working, it's kind of leaving enough space for somebody to do that; to place, over your words, their own kind of experience or association, or to hold up the thing that is, for them, equivalent to what you've written.

Gillian Allnutt Yes, or to be put unconsciously in touch, I think, so that it's their own world, their own experience, their own being, that they bring to the poem to make it meaningful. But it's not at all, obviously, it's not at all a conscious process.

Kayo Chingonyi I think if it were conscious, it would be too – well, it would move into being manipulative, I suppose. And I think those attempts to be such in a poem are readily obvious to the reader and also probably to the author too. But Boyle has said that all literature is tricks in a gesture towards the idea that it's different layers of technique. And I don't know – with a poem, in a sense the propositional content is very simple, in one way, which is "I remember this thing, it makes me feel x". Or "this thing is important to me, and I'm trying to make it important to you, or at least I'm trying to make you think about the importance of it". But I think when you layer certain complications and considerations on top of those simple impulses, that's when something interesting happens in the space of a poem. And I think if I can detect too easily the intention behind the poem, then I begin to distrust it, whereas when I made to feel something by the different layers that have been put in place, then I can't detect what the intention was, but I can see by all those layers, by that effort, by that process, that somebody has cared about something and so maybe I'll care about it as well. Yeah, I don't know. I think poets have been distrusted by a range of people and I'm not sure that they're especially trusted in a widespread way now, but, yeah, I think moving away from that – from feeling too strongly one's influence on an audience or reader, and moving into a space in which you're in communication or communion, I think is more... I don't know. It's less ethically dubious, I suppose, because there's lots of linguistic manipulation going on in our lives already without adding to it.

Laura McKenzie Very true.

Kayo Chingonyi Yeah. So I try not to as best as I can, but...

Gillian Allnutt That's really interesting, I think. I think, in the end, the key to it is to be able to allow yourself to be vulnerable. And to cut out cleverness. I've so many times, in the course of

writing a poem, had to overcome the temptation to be clever, because it's never the best thing, in the end. You have to sacrifice – I have to sacrifice – the cleverness.

Kayo Chingonyi And that is often to do with a particular kind of cleverness, also, which is performative. And some forms of intellect really disappear. Some forms of intellect are really about giving a space to someone else for a long period of time. And that takes enormous capacity and energy and understanding, which isn't as celebrated because of the ways in which it faces the self. But I know what you mean about a mode of writing which is clever for its own sake, or in that kind of performance of cleverness, which, after you're impressed by that technical, whatever that the poem has, there's not often anything else there, which is... yeah, which is the shame of that kind of writing. Because it can never truly illustrate the thing that you're trying to demonstrate anyway. So yeah, I feel it's better to try and go for the vulnerability, hard though it is.

Gillian Allnutt But I think it's mysterious as well. I don't think I'm ever quite sure how much any other person will get from a poem, but the title poem of *wake*, there's a tiny little four or five line thing at the end. I put it in a pamphlet first and – because three people picked it out and said, "I really liked that one", and I thought it was totally incomprehensible. It was a sort of accumulation of four o'clock in the morning experiences and coming to terms with things. And I thought that it was totally obscure. But clearly, the emotional, psychic, spiritual energy that went into those, or came out of those, experiences, I suppose must have gone into the poem. So it didn't matter about the references being totally personal. If that makes any sense.

Kayo Chingonyi I think it does. Yeah. Would you be open to reading that particular poem?

Gillian Allnutt I could read that one.

Kayo Chingonyi Thank you.

Gillian Allnutt I'll just read the poem without any kind of introduction.

> **Gillian Allnutt [reading]** It's dedicated for my father, myself, wake, solitude laid down as bedrock, being, sweet chariot, sweet clarinet of bone, where late the sweet bird sang.

Gillian Allnutt I think also, I mean, going through these three books yesterday, I became aware of the through-threads in my work, I suppose, and how, not surprisingly, I guess, the poems do grow out of each other, and build on each other. So there's a whole hinterland behind the images in that little four-line thing, which I suppose an acquaintance with my earlier work would help the reader to see, but I hope that's not necessary.

Laura McKenzie Where do you feel that hinterland lies both in your work, like, at what points? But also, is that something that's more ephemeral, this sense of hinterland and emotional space?

Gillian Allnutt Yes, there's a wonderful essay by Karen Carson, in – it was a book of contemporary poets. *Strong Words*, it's called, published by Bloodaxe. Contemporary poets thinking critically about poetry. And, I love etymology and I spend a lot of time, when I'm writing poems, looking up words in the dictionary to make sure I really know what they mean. But then I find the historical layers – I've got a shorter OED – of those words, and often I'll think, "Can I use this word in this way?" And I'll look it up, and it might be an obsolete meaning, or it might be early 17th century, and I'll think, "How far can I push this?" But that's what I mean about the hinterland of a word: all the history that it brings with it, the shadows of earlier ways of using it. And I think also, I mean, it seems like a completely obvious idea, but the older you get, the more sense of history you have, I think. And I remember, I mean, I love working in primary schools, especially with Year Three – seven year olds. Because they just love playing with words. But I did a project in Hexham, with the school that was right next door to the Abbey. And we were doing the Anglo Saxons, who I also love. And I was trying to do a bit of timeline stuff – and I've done this in other schools as well, to try and get them to put what we're talking about in roughly the right place on the historical timeline. And those kids and other kids, they're just completely all over the place. They know, I mean, maybe the Romans 1066 to the Victorians, but absolutely no idea about what order things come in. And so I really thought

about that. And I thought, well, of course, to have a sense of history, you've got to have some history yourself, I think. And I thought, I mean, when I put wake together, I thought, hmm, there's a lot more history in the way I write about landscape, but that's probably an aspect of the same thing, that being so old now.

Laura McKenzie How much has that particular landscape of Esh Winning, of County Durham, played into your work?

Gillian Allnutt I think it's the landscape mediated through Christian history, through Christianity, really. And I mean, I don't think of myself as a Christian, a practising Christian, but I got such a hefty dose of it as a child, and I grew up in the Church of England, and we went to church every Sunday, and my dad grew up in the Baptist chapel. And then I went to La Sagesse and got a dose of Catholicism. And so there was all that, but there was also my mother was – she was a good person, my mum, and she was a Christian. And I've come to feel that part of her gift to me, since she died, is Christianity and my sort of abiding interest in it. And the poems are just kind of made of it, there's so much of its imagery, so the landscape of County Durham, I suppose, and Northumberland, is mediated through that early Christian history.

Laura McKenzie Yeah, yes. Like Holy Island, your wild holiday.

Kayo Chingonyi There's a lot of early Christian history to be found in these parts, I suppose. And I guess, the other thing is there aren't many formal places of pilgrimage, but there are many sites of significant interest to Christianity all over the place. And I think if you go into the depth of it, there's such a richness, both of that kind of historical information, but also documents and writing and an engagement with that history as well. I was wondering about this idea of a hinterland, actually, in relation to your word choices, your use of quite short lines, and indeed short poems. It feels very much that that particular way of working... it feels very related to *this* kind of landscape for me, because it's not a very densely populated landscape. And so what you do see has a kind of extra pressure around it, somehow, in the way that one word in a short poem has more, kind of, emphasis somehow. And tracing that movement

across your work, it seems like that's an abiding interest that you have in relation to language: what weight can one word carry, that I could do away with the entire sentence that used to be here and just say one word and encapsulate something maybe a bit more mysterious but more powerful somehow for being brief?

Gillian Allnutt Thank you for saying that. I shall think about that. It's interesting because I think, "Oh, don't ask me how I do it, because I've no idea." But sometimes the word will come into my ken, a word I've known all my life, but suddenly it lights up. It's a kind of luminosity, I suppose. So maybe that's something to do with it.

Kayo Chingonyi I recognise that feeling that you're talking about, which is, for some reason, the way someone says a phrase or something just makes that phrase almost strange again.

Gillian Allnutt Yes.

Kayo Chingonyi Yeah, and in the process of writing becomes about reckoning with that new strangeness and where that has come from, or why that focus has shifted in that way. So is it something that you're attentive to and you note down in something like a notebook? Or is it something that you remember and go back to when you're writing? Or is the process of writing less specific to one moment and a kind of continuous process for you?

Gillian Allnutt Gosh. I think when I got the Northern Rock Award, I gave up all my teaching, because they asked you to give up a bit of your work, so other poets can have the money. But being me, I decided I'd experiment with giving it all up. And then, because most of my poems had started in creative writing workshops and classes, I was bereft of that. So I had to think, "How do I write now " And it became a completely different process, and one much harder to pin down. The writing attached itself not to teaching anymore, but to meditation. So that's clearly a lot less earthed than teaching. And it became, instead of being a red hot process, it became a cold white process. And it also had to do – 20 years ago, I gave up smoking, and I used to hammer away a poem until it was done, even if it took seven, eight, nine hours, and then kind of look at the clock and think, "How can it be that late?" and "I'm starving". But now

without smoking to sustain me, I can't do that. So I will do a draft, and then come back after a few days and do another draft. And I find I have to retrace my steps to where I was. So actually, I've no idea how to describe the writing process. But I don't keep notebooks. I mean, I might throw something down in the back of my diary if I'm on a bus, and it comes. But then pretty soon afterwards, it's almost like I hold my breath until I can write it properly.

Kayo Chingonyi I think that's the test of an idea is, if it can survive whatever is keeping you from writing it up into something, then it's probably interesting. That's what I like to tell myself to make up for the times that I've forgotten the wonderful line that would create the poem of poems that I've never written.

Gillian Allnutt Do you have a fixed way of working that you could describe as "the way I write"?

Kayo Chingonyi No, no, but I do think there is a through-line in all of the writing that I do, whether it be in prose, or writing a song, or writing a poem. And the through line is that: the best way for it to happen is if something comes into mind that I don't understand, or I'm mystified by in some kind of way. I think my best work comes out of that surprise and discovery. But sometimes, I do write things in response to a brief or commission or that kind of thing. And because of the specificity of that brief, I'm forced to be playful in ways that I'm not ordinarily, to make it interesting for myself. So something arises out of that tension, which I also like, but I think the best work that I do as far as feeling integrated and making something that isn't just about impressing anyone or anything like that is probably where I have to discover where this line that has come into my head comes from and what is the context, or invent that context. So yeah, that's really the thing that always comes back in the process, but the process is very different depending on what I'm doing. And I travel a lot. So lots of it is not a lovely desk in a quiet room, but it's in the midst of people going to Edinburgh Festival or things like that – all of these kind of noises of the world are very much a part of my writing environment, quite often. I think the thing about it that I really like is that you get the slightly different textures of speech as you travel along, because from Leeds even to York, there is a world of difference between out-look. And then when you cross from Yorkshire into the North

East, it changes again. So yeah, I think I've picked up something from it. But I don't know what that is yet. And I don't know how it's coming out in writing, but I'm sure that it is. Yeah, because it is a lot of stimulus. So I think that there must be something I'm picking up from it.

Gillian Allnutt I really love that, um, Radio 4 – *The Listening Project*?

Laura McKenzie Oh, yes. I love that. Yeah.

Gillian Allnutt I love those conversations. And I felt I've been absolutely inspired by those. In fact, this book I've been putting together in connection with *Hearing the Voice* project at Durham, and it's got conversations, and it's got my own poems in it. And I run workshops with exercises that would enable me to write a poem that has something to do with voice. So I've been thinking a lot about voice and conversation. But I know that that series, of which I haven't heard that many, but it's magic, somehow. There's something really numinous, something magical about that, and it's something I want to put my finger on. And so it's really fed a lot into this Voice Hearing book.

Laura McKenzie Would you like to read 'Convent Girl'?

> **Gillian Allnutt [reading] '**Convent Girl': they wearied me with prayer. In the darkening garden of the dene, I stared. I sought him where the way was unprepared, a wild rose. The old road with its white line will not come again, nor my heart with its old-fashioned indicators. But my riven father who knows.

Laura McKenzie Riven feels like a very powerful word. And also feels quite northern to me. I don't know why, I don't think there's any accuracy in that. But it feels like a northern word.

Gillian Allnutt There's something in the King James Bible. In one of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion, and the veil was riven, I think, at the point where Christ dies. It is really powerful. And my father – my father was in a flame-throwing tank regiment in the war. And that was a horrible thing to be involved in. And also they were sent in to help burn down Belsen

after the camp had been cleared. And those things, particularly Belsen, he never talked about. And so, in a way, that's where the riven comes from, I think. There was that part of him that had experienced all that, and the rest of him. And when I when I worked with asylum seekers in the North East, in the last 10 years, and I had the experience of getting emotionally very close to some of the people that I worked with, and then realising that actually, I didn't really know anything of the stories, their stories, the appalling experiences that they've been through, because they didn't talk about them and I didn't ask, but nevertheless, we were very close. And I thought, "How can this be?" And then I understood that, I think, because I'd grown up with my father. And he hadn't talked about all these things that he'd been through. And I understood further, I think, that he needed us – myself and my sisters- not to know. He needed us not to know about it so that, in a sense, he could imagine that it hadn't happened. I think. It's complicated, but I mean, all that's in the poem. But I was a long way before this understanding I have now when I wrote this poem, so it was much less conscious. It was unconscious in me, I suppose.

Kayo Chingonyi There is, I think a lot of information that we don't have about those people that we love, and we know them at one level. There are different levels of knowing. And 'know' is a very, very broad word in that poem. I think it's very expansive. But I think some somehow the mystery in a poem access that kind of ambiguity in knowing someone. There are so many interior worlds, some of which somebody might not connect with as a kind of conscious defence, and some of which might just be, by some unconscious process, suppressed entirely until they're enlivened by the right resonance or stimulus or something like that. But yes, I know what you mean about working with groups of asylum seekers or refugees, migrants, people whose experiences that I don't ask about, but which somehow poetry, even about other subjects, touches on or accesses in ways that I don't understand. And I find that powerful, because my responses to certain traumas has been to write things which people do not associate with those traumas directly, but which for me, will always mean what they mean. And there's something very freeing about a form of language which allows for that ambiguity and mystery, and in which people accept mystery as part of the whole thing. Did writing these poems help you know your father better?

Gillian Allnutt Yes. And in fact, I think – my mother died in 2004 and my father in 2006, and my mother is settled now. Things are settled between her and me. But my father is still going on. Yes. So it's still falling into place. Hopefully, eventually, it will. It's a long journey with him. We had a difficult relationship. So

Laura McKenzie Can we have one from Kayo?

Gillian Allnutt Yes.

Kayo Chingonyi I think a short poem is a way of trying to carry a thought, or some thoughts, across to someone else very simply and clearly. And so the process of making it is almost the kind of direct "This is it, here have it" kind of process. Whereas with a longer poem, it builds up over such a long period of time, for me, at least, that it gets into my mind that way. Whereas this poem is one of the last poems that was written for the book. And as soon as it was in the right form, that was it. It was done. Which, yeah, for some of the other poems, I thought they were in the right form, and they weren't done. Yeah. And I think if you're communicating simply and trying to, yeah, trying to disappear, as in this poem, then something, yeah, it's harder to remember somehow.

> **Kayo Chingonyi [reading] '**For those orphaned late in life' What if the wind blowing through the French doors of your childhood is the house's way of saying goodbye? And when you call out, answering yourself, greeting the gone out of habit, you hear for the first time, the timbre of your voice how someone else might?

Gillian Allnutt That's a fantastic poem. It's so mysterious, and yet not mysterious. I mean, part of me, my deeper part, my intuition, I suppose, goes [clicks fingers] "absolutely". Fantastic. Amazing. What's that about?

Kayo Chingonyi It's a question as well, the last part, which I love doing that, but you're not supposed to, too often. I had to cut some question endings from the book, which I think was good advice from my editor, because there were a number of endings on a question, but yeah,

I think mystery's important in poems, sometimes, especially in relation to an experience that I haven't had. Which is partly what the poem is about – it is a gift for those orphaned late in life. It's really just that. It was my attempt to make something for them and get into their perspective somehow.

Gillian Allnutt Because you were orphaned so early in life.

Kayo Chingonyi Comparatively speaking, yeah. But, you know, I sometimes think that a formative experience of that kind of grief is, if not necessarily auspicious, or good, or lucky, or anything, it kind of allows space and time for another version of events; another reality to become real, and to be celebrated. I've had a lot of time to come to terms with it, understand it, and feel the way I feel about it in a way that's integrated. Whereas I think for people whose parents have been alive for most of their lives, and as they get into their 50s, and 60s, if they still have their parents around then, there is that feeling, "Oh, you know, this person had a good innings" and whatever else, but I think there is something about losing someone at that stage which isn't reflected on too much – which is that if you have someone for so long, that still doesn't mean you've exhausted the possibilities of what that person can mean to you; of what you can learn from that person; of how you can turn to that person. I see people whose parents are in their 80s, in their 90s, and they still turn to them in moments of distress or confusion, or, you know. And it used to frustrate me when the kind of parental people in my life said "you'll always be a kid to me", but I kind of understand it, without having my own kids, now, what that is, what that means. And whether that child is 10, or 60, or 70, you can always feel that feeling about them. And that feeling is reciprocal, I think, or it can be, at least, in relation to the parent and what they represent. There's an unreality about a parent, there's a kind of – they're almost like a character that you create in your mind until such time as you let them be something else. Yeah.

Gillian Allnutt And when they die, you are bereaved of the daughter or the son that you yourself were.

Kayo Chingonyi Yes, exactly. I feel as if that reciprocal communication is a powerful way in which lots of us feel ourselves. I'm very moved by cultures in which one is named after a parent in terms of your surname or whatever else. But also, you might move through a certain community and someone might say, "Oh, that's such-and-such's son." And that kind of thing is very important as well, in terms of how you feel yourself. But um, yeah, there's a lot of self-fashioning which happens in relation to someone else. And that person is usually a parent.

Gillian Allnutt No, well I was orphaned relatively late in life, so that's a gift to me as well.

Kayo Chingonyi I was wondering just about this specific idea of exile in relation to the North East. It seems as if it's taken you a long time to feel... while you do feel at home here on some instinctive level, because of that early experience of the North East, it's taken you a long time to reconcile that feeling and to somehow accept it, as it were, because your writing sometimes draws you to writing about other places. And so, yeah, I wonder about this sense of exile that you talked about in relation to the North East, and the time that you've spent here, and also your experience of it, maybe, as it began in the 50s, and as it's kind of shifted.

Gillian Allnutt I think, in the end, it has to do with the fact that from almost from the very beginning of my life, I banished part of myself. And when I was doing psychotherapy, I responded to a request from the therapist to remember very early experiences, and I said, "I can't," and so she said, "Imagine them." And I found myself writing a story about having sent myself to a planet called Banesh and, and how actually the planet was stationary, but when I started to work on it all, it spun again. It started to spin. And I think that's been a really, really long journey, to I recall that part of myself that I banished into exile. And I think for a long time, before I worked with asylum seekers, I wanted to, and there seemed no way, somehow, to make contact. But then when I did, I was really privileged because I had a writing residency, so I could use the most central part of myself to work with those people. And I realised quite early in the project that part of my gripping interest was that I wanted to recall the asylum seeker in myself. So I think, in a way I've needed to live in exile. Because, in fact, I always have. When I was seven and we moved to the North East, I was exiled from my grandmother, who was more a mother than my mother, I think, and from – my parents had both grown up in southeast

London and their families were there. I think, in some ways, they wanted to get away from their families. But in so many ways, it was an exile. Yes. But I also think – I mean, I've come to feel... um, because also I sort of, I think a lot on a spiritual level. And I think I am in this world, but not of it. And in a way, I've needed to reproduce that all my life: to be in a place, although I'm not of it. Yeah, things have so many layers.

Kayo Chingonyi I feel that being not of a place is very fruitful to writing. And I find it in common with a number of writers that either it's a kind of mental restlessness, which means that they create places that don't exist, if you want to say it that way, but then do exist in the sense that the mind is its own reality. And then there might be a restlessness, which is that they journey to different places, and draw inspiration from different places. Or they live in a place but also keep a certain distance as well, or keep a fluid motion in relation to their belonging to a place; both belonging and unbelonging at the same time, I suppose. Yeah. And maybe that tension is part of what makes it possible to write about a place. Because I think if you're ideally situated in life, you wouldn't make a career of writing, perhaps, maybe you'd write the occasional thing. But I feel there is a longing that's somehow woven into the writing process. And if you write about place, maybe that longing is about trying to rediscover a place that you can't access anymore, or king of memorialise or celebrate or imagine a place also. Yeah, I very rarely write about places that I'm in at that immediate moment until I'm removed in some way, for a period of time.

Gillian Allnutt So have you been back to Zambia very much?

Kayo Chingonyi Not much. I have been, and I'm intending to go again. But yeah, my relationship to is very much one of trying to rediscover and discover as much as I can, at this point. I think for most of my life, it seemed to return to the idea of exile somewhere that I couldn't or wouldn't return. And now that return is more possible. There is a sense in which it's fractional or conditional. And so I cannot live there in the way that I am *now*. I would have to change my life into something different, and be a different person almost. So yeah, the physical return is only part of it, I think. There is a kind of spiritual dimension to returning there,

which I haven't yet reconciled. I haven't found a way to be every version of myself at one time and place.

Gillian Allnutt Because that, in a way is what you're doing in *Kumukanda*, writing about the UK equivalent of initiation?

Kayo Chingonyi Hmm. Yeah, I think so. I think, you know, lots of initiations I experienced in the North East, or in the UK, in London, in various places I've lived, aren't recorded in the book, but certainly it's a book that kind of tries to explore those things. Yeah, being in heavy snow fall, the tall ships, Shields. All of it is in there somehow. The songs, as well, because slightly different to London schools, in primary schools around here you learn so many kinds of songs that have to do with the history. And I'm sure you do in London schools to a certain extent, but I suppose I'm thinking about like 'Bobby Shafto' and those kind of those folk music songs.

Gillian Allnutt Yes. We all knew the 'Keel Row'.

Kayo Chingonyi Exactly. Yeah. So yeah, I think those kind of initiations are very much in my work and probably will always be. Because they brought me into the English language as kind of a living thing. A mutating thing.

Laura McKenzie Because there's quite a significant intersection in your work, I think, between poetry and music, those two worlds. And so do you think being introduced to that folk tradition has played a part in how you're thinking about music and rhythm and rhyme as well?

Kayo Chingonyi I think so. I think I aspire to creating the kinds of writing that are memorable in that kind of way, whereby the author can disappear, but the work retains a kind of strength or some kind of compelling element. Yeah, I think I've noticed one or two poets like using an image or a phrase or some kind of thing, which they've picked up from reading, like one of the poems or because I've been working with that poet, and they've maybe been looking at my work at that time. And within hip hop, which is one of my main musical influences, there is a

kind of long history of borrowings and cross pollinations. And my writing style as a poet is very heavily borrowed from other writers and to see that process continue, not just for me, but for other writers of my age that are publishing and then sort of giving other people permission to work within that vein, and then they take that thing and run with it in their own direction – I'm really moved by that. And that's something that those kind of folk lyrics do as well. They provide a kind of framework for people to then improvise more on top of. And I'd like for my work to do that, yeah, because then it becomes more communal in terms of other writers, as well as readers and everything else. Yeah.

Laura McKenzie And on that note, thank you very much Kayo; thank you, Gillian. It's been an absolute joy. That was a wide-ranging, wonderful conversation. Thank you very much. You must be knackered.

Acknowledgements

That's all for this episode of Writing Durham. This podcast was supported by Durham University as part of a wider project on Durham's literary heritage, which has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Next time I'll be joined by author Mim Skinner, who lives in Durham City, and we'll be talking about her debut book Jailbirds: Lessons from a Women's Prison*.*