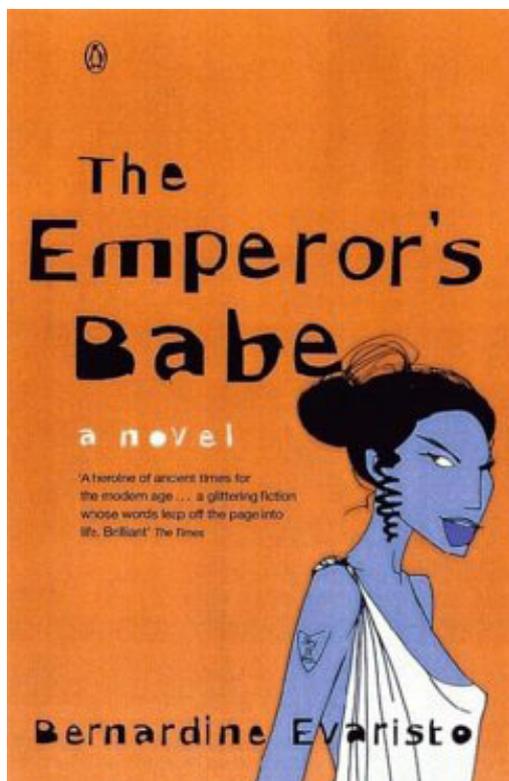


# Interview with Poet-Novelist Bernardine Evaristo

on Gender, Sexuality, Feminism,  
Masculinity and Race

Ingrid von Rosenberg

(*TU Dresden*)



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Bernardine Evaristo is one of the most inventive and by now highly respected British novelists, especially admired for her unusual command of a great variety of language registers and her refreshingly humorous approach to serious topics. As a young woman she was one of the black and Asian British writers who

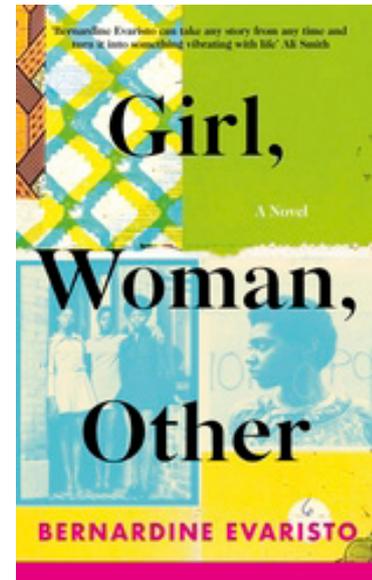
appeared on the literary scene in the mid-1990s with a bang, immediately winning the interest and acclaim of the media, the reading public and the critics (other successful newcomers were e.g. Diran Adebayo, Andrea Levy, Courttia Newland and Joanna Traynor). Evaristo was born in 1959 in Woolwich, south east London, as the fourth of eight children to an English mother and a Nigerian father. To date she has published eight books including one novella and has won several prestigious prizes. Central themes of her work have been the search of women and men for identity in a hybrid society as well as the fanciful re-writing of black history in an affirmative way. Having begun her career as a poet, Evaristo has continued to use verse in her fiction. *Lara* (1997), her first novel, is a novel-in-verse and so is her second novel *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), while her later fiction mixes verse with prose or is fully written in prose. The announcements of her new novel *Girl*,

*Woman, Other* (coming out in May 2019), an ambitious project, make curious: twelve “mainly black British female protagonists” appear, whose lives – in her own words – “intersect in an experimental form I call ‘fusion fiction’”. Excitingly, the book has recently been selected for the Booker Prize 2019 longlist.

I have known Bernardine Evaristo for quite a while, meeting her at readings and conferences, and have followed her writing career with growing admiration. When we met again at a conference on “Writing Gender: Sexuality, Feminism and Masculinity”, which she chaired, in November 2018, I was very pleased that she was willing to answer in writing some questions I had concerning her attitude to gender and race. Her answer arrived on 13th July 2018 via e-mail.

**Ingrid von Rosenberg (IR):** *You have - expertly - chaired the British Council seminar in Berlin on “Writing Gender: Sexuality, Feminism and Masculinity” in January 2018. What made you accept the chair - have you developed a special interest in the topic?*

**Bernardine Evaristo (BE):** My interest in those issues goes back to the eighties when I co-founded Theatre of Black Women, Britain’s first such company to focus on creating theatre by and for black women. I came of age as a feminist and theatre maker while still at drama school and it has informed my



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creative practice ever since, although that hasn’t meant that my books are directly to be seen as ‘feminist’. I think that art and people have a complexity and messiness that defies our own political persuasions. I can’t crowbar my gender politics into their lives because it will expose a feminist agenda. For example, *Mr Loverman* was directly addressing the issue of older black male homosexuality, but my protagonist Barrington isn’t a New Man, a reconstructed male, in fact he’s quite anti-feminist in a reactionary dinosaurish way. This is true to the character I created, a man of his time, generation and origins. As I write my characters into being they cannot be my puppets or mouthpieces for my politics. However, my politics informs my work at a deeper, less obvious level, where it needs to remain. Writing about the African diaspora is a political act in a society where so few of these books are published.

However, having said all of the above, my next book, *Girl, Woman, Other* (Penguin Random House, coming out in May 2019) is one where I've created twelve mainly black British female protagonists whose lives intersect in an experimental form I call 'fusion fiction'. It's very much a contemporary novel for our times and the issues of gender, sexuality, masculinity etc. have been uppermost in my mind for many years as I've been writing it, so when I was asked to chair the Berlin Seminar for a second year (the first year I chose the topic of Diversity), it seemed natural to zoom in on what these issues might mean for writers.

**IR:** *Your work from Lara to Blonde Roots seems to me to circle around two main issues: one is the - very fanciful, often humorous - re-writing of black British history in an affirmative sense, breaking away from the dominant narrative of black people as victims; the other is female empowerment despite the double oppression by racial marginalisation and male dominance. In all these works you have created strong heroines who succeed in asserting themselves, even though Zuleika pays with her life. Hello Mum and Mr Loverman have male heroes – has your interest shifted from black history and black women's position to a wider treatment of gender?*

**BE:** *Hello Mum* was an examination of the

masculinity of a teenage boy, as it was in an older Caribbean male in *Mr Loverman*. But I think all of these topics (black history, women, black women) continue to run throughout all of my works; they are intersected, going back to the female lives in *Lara*, both black and white. In *Girl, Woman, Other*, the women are a manifestation of multiple female experiences and stories. Aged from nineteen to ninety-four, they come from an array of cultural and mixed-racial backgrounds, classes, British locations, professions, sexualities and one of them becomes trans. Some of them are feminists, others are not. I write strong but flawed female characters (and male), but they have to be imperfect beings in an imperfect world. In a sense, I am in a conversation with my characters, who speak to me as much as vice versa. I love losing myself in their worlds and getting under their skin.

**IR:** *Barry, the hero of Mr Loverman, is gay; Jerome in Hello Mum is a vulnerable boy; and you mentioned that your next novel will deal with a transgender person. Do you feel that- considering their social position - these minorities have a lot in common with women? Why not create a 'cis'man as a central figure??*

**BE:** Jerome, Barrington and Stanley in *Soul Tourists* are all cis male because they identify with the gender role they were born into. Jerome

and Stanley are heterosexual, Barry is not.

**IR:** *You are a master of language, sociolects and dialects, using all kinds of registers with ease. Did you find it difficult to imagine and express the thoughts and feelings of a gay man? Why is he cast as a comic character and his marriage, which obviously frustrated both partners immensely, treated as a comedy?*

**BE:** I beg to differ, my treatment of Barry's marriage to Carmel is tragic-comic. On the one hand you have Barry's perspective on their toxic relationship, expressed through his often comedic disdain for his wife, and on the other hand you have Carmel's parallel narrative where we see that her unhappy marriage has traumatised her for over fifty years. Even Barry's position is tragic because he hasn't felt able to come out as a gay man since he first knew he was sixty years ago. He has led a life in hiding, of not being his true self to anyone except Morris, so he too has suffered as a result of his deception. I also question that there is something wrong with finding humour in tragedy. As they say, humour is a serious business, and in *Mr Loverman* I use it as a means to explore and stay true to character, to tease out the uncomfortable reality of the marriage from Barry's point of view, and to expose the absurdity of human behaviour. I'm the kind of writer who needs to be irreverent, who wants to puncture the po-facedness of some of the humourless literature

out there and who also uses humour to reveal the contradictions inherent in who people consider themselves to be and who they actually are, and how they present themselves to others.

**IR:** *Do you think that the interest in gender varieties and their belonging is generally growing in the literary field, overshadowing questions of race?*

**BE:** On the one hand the explosion of hundreds of gender identities into the mainstream is a new phenomenon *on this scale*, but commensurately the conversation around race is also enjoying a renaissance, which is what happens when we witness some of the extremes of racism that need to be challenged and counteracted; and in the social media age, when voices speak to each other away from the usual brokering of the mainstream media, across the barriers of time zones, countries and cultures, we see grass roots movements developing in a way that simply wasn't possible before. For those of us interested in gender and race, we experience it as a complex, intertwined and dynamic network of ideas and positions that must grow together.

**IR:** *How much importance do you ascribe to sex in your works? What significance does it have alongside other themes?*

**BE:** Sex features in most of books. I believe it to be a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human and without it we would not exist. (Irony alert.) I'm always surprised when writers avoid writing it. I enjoy writing sex from my characters' perspectives - it involves a deeper expression of who they are and often represents not only their subconscious selves, but it can be a way to explore other issues. Barry and Morris have sex as 74 year old gay Caribbean men, which was an imaginative challenge for me. Carmel, Barry's wife has sex in her office which involves the imagery of stationery, something I had a lot of fun with, and while it is supposed to be comic, it's also supposed to be erotic. The eponymous Lara has light S&M sex, which was an exploration of the power relationship between her and her Nigerian lover and was a psychological echo of her father's use of corporal punishment; while her mother, Ellen, has a graphically-realised sex with Taiwo in the same novel, which is a way to deepen the intimacy of their love as a just-married couple. When Zuleika, 1800 years ago in Roman London, is forced to have sex with her husband on her wedding night, she is eleven and he is 33. It's essentially rape and a source of great emotional and physical pain to her, and it's rich in imagery with references to classical mythology including the myth of Persephone. When she first has sex with Emperor Septimius Severus,

I am exploring not only male-female power relations (she's 18, he's in his 40s) but also relating it to the Roman Empire upon which the British Empire was modelled. Later in the novel she rides him, 'teasing' him, 'taming' him and it represents a shift in their power dynamic.

**IR:** *Do you think that the esteem for black writers and artists has recently grown in Britain, as the awarding of the Turner to Lubaina Himid and the appointment of Jackie Kay to the national poet of Scotland, the Scots Makar, seem to indicate?*

**BE:** These moments are always wonderful to celebrate and do indicate a more open society. Both women were part of the 80s movement of black artists to which I belonged - and it's amazing to think that all these years later this kind of shift can happen. We certainly never imagined it back then when black women artists were so marginalised. However, individual successes do not mean that others are also being let in, it does not mark generational success and I think we have a long way to go before the playing field has been levelled. Right now in the UK, in July 2018, we're dealing with both the *Windrush* deportation debacle, which suggests that we haven't moved on as much as we like to think, and developments in publishing where more writers of colour are being published or in the pipeline, than for a very long time. As always, time

is the great marker of permanent success.  
Let's see where we are in ten years' time.

**IR:** *Thank you so much for your enlightening and thought-provoking answers. And thank you too for the generous permission to reprint a passage from The Emperor's Babe, you spoke about: the first sexy lovers' meeting between Zuleika and her Roman Emperor.*