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Cressida Cowell [00:00:13] Hello there, I'm Cressida Cowell the author and illustrator of How to Train Your Dragon, Wizards of Once and Which Way to Anwhere, my new book series. And I'm so glad you've joined me for the Reading is Magic Festival. Sometimes things that you do or say have a way of turning into something bigger than you imagined and carrying on longer than you thought they would. Like the Reading is Magic Festival, which started in 2020 when I was the Waterstones Children's Laureate. It was inspired by my belief that reading is magic, and magic is for everyone. All the events during the festival explore the themes of the charter I wrote when I was the laureate and celebrate all the things you have the right: creativity, having a planet to read on, seeing yourselves in a book, reading for the joy of it, and getting brilliant advice about books and about reading from people whose job it is to do something. I hope you enjoy this event.

Lauren [00:01:33] Hi guys, it's Lauren Layfield here I am currently sat in my orange top. I have got brown hair and I'm in front of my amazing Reading is Magic Festival Bunting. And that's because we're here for day three. And I'm so pleased to introduce an absolute legend as our first guest today. Benjamin Zephaniah is here to talk about his brand new book is called We Sang Across the Sea. The Empire Windrush and Me. He's going to be doing a bit of reading from the book for us. So without further ado, enjoy.

Ella [00:02:12] Hello and welcome everybody to the Reading is Magic Festival. It is such a pleasure to be here. My name is Ella MacLeod and I'm a writer and I am a black woman wearing a brown top with lots of necklaces and earrings and dark green braids. And I am joined by Benjamin Zephaniah.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:02:37] That's me and I'm an author and I am the author of the book We sang Across the Sea, The Empire Windrush and Me, which I am holding in my hand right now. And I'm in a little house in Lincolnshire wearing a red kung fu suit. Long dreadlocks, have been wearing them all my life and a smile because I'm from the Caribbean, but born in Birmingham. You feel me?

Ella [00:03:05] Yeah. I know this because I'm also from the Caribbean but born in London, so we both have our smiles. Benjamin, it's so good to see you. We've met once before doing something like this. So I'm thrilled to be chatting to you about this wonderful book. How are you doing today?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:03:24] I'm okay. I'm very happy. I've been doing really boring things. Nobody gets really excited.

Ella [00:03:30] Oh, good. So can we talk about this wonderful story? Can you tell me a bit about what inspired you to write it?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:03:39] Well, a lot of people know about the story of the Empire Windrush, the ship that came in 1948. Many people, our descendants, and by that, not our descendants. Is that the right way?

Ella [00:03:53] We are their descendants.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:03:55] We are their descendants, right. And, um, and so there's lots of footage or quite a bit of footage. And usually they show the men. And most of them were men, especially from the Caribbean. Ex-Servicemen coming to make a better life.

They're going to start a life here and then call for their wives back home. But I wrote this book, which is based on the true story of a woman. And her name was Mona Baptiste, and she came from Trinidad. She wasn't poor, she was quite well-off. She was very upper class as it was. She actually travelled on the Windrush first class, you know, under, and then she came because she wanted to be a singer. And I was fascinated by the story of this girl growing up in Trinidad, singing in Trinidad and going, you know, this is great, but I want to go and conquer the world. So I'm going to go to England and make a career for myself there. So it's the story about her coming to England. I say story, it's a poem. Mm hmm. Beautiful illustrations.

Ella [00:05:12] Yeah, it's got gorgeous illustrations and gorgeous words written by yourself. And you've been a poet for a very long time now. Can you talk a bit about what attracted you to poetry? Why poetry was what you what you wanted to do?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:05:28] Well, it's interesting because, you know, with what we're doing now is all about reading. But when I was growing up, there were no books in my house. When my parents did not do books. My dad didn't really like them.

Ella [00:05:43] Wow.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:05:44] Once he caught me with the book it and he told me to get rid of that book and find something to do. But I love stories. And my mother was full of stories about Jamaica, and she had recipes that she remembered in poetry and lots of the things that she wanted to tell us would be in the form of a poem, so we would memorise it. And so I loved the spoken poetry, and that's where I really got my love of poetry. And the thing I love about poetry is that... I can be very happy and write a poem. I can be very sad and write a poem. I can see something on the TV about war, famine in a country and I think I've got to say something so I write the poem about it. And go from very happy to very sad and everything in between. It's your expression of your soul. And that's why I love poetry. So I was making the poetry in my head a long time before I was writing poetry down. I don't know if you know it, but I am very dyslexic.

Ella [00:06:57] Yes, I did know that. Yeah.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:07:00] That's a big word. Writing it is such a big, complicated word. And for people who find words complicated.

Speaker 4 [00:07:07] Yes.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:07:08] But, um. So for me, actually, oral poetry was the thing really. I mean, I did learn to read and write, but when I learnt to read and write, I then learned that I was dyslexic. So I've always loved saying poetry. I mean, even when I write a poem in a book, I hear the words in my head. It's not just an exercise on the page. I want children to be able to say the poems and memorise them.

Ella [00:07:38] Yeah.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:07:39] And this poem has a chorus, so it's almost like a song.

Ella [00:07:42] It is. I mean, it's so true. Your poetry is written to be read and to be spoken aloud. And I remember at school having to get up and recite your poems. 'Be nice to yu turkeys dis christmas' was always my favourite one to do in front of the class. So I really I

mean, I think it's I agree with you, the poetry is a wonderful way to kind of work out what you're feeling about something. So maybe some of you watching and listening, if you're feeling a particularly strong feeling, feeling really happy or feeling really sad or really angry, you can go and try and write a poem about it. I think that's a good way to to to think about what you're feeling about things.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:08:23] I got to tell you something. I used to write poems and put them in my teacher's desk.

Ella [00:08:28] Did you? What were those poems about?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:08:30] I can't tell you.

Ella [00:08:33] Were they cheeky poems about your teacher's?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:08:36] Very well, yeah, there are sometimes what I thought of the lesson sometimes. I mean they were never naughty or anything like that. And just thought sometimes, you know, you are in the classroom with thirty other students and you haven't got a chance to speak. And I thought I will just leave a little poem just to tell the teacher how much I like this lesson.

Ella [00:08:56] That's lovely. I bet they loved it.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:08:59] I remember. I had a science teacher. Yeah. And I thought she was really great. And sometimes the other kids would tease me because they thought I'd like the teacher a bit too much. But she was so good at teaching science, and I would leave little messages and suggest: 'Miss next week, can we do space? Or can we do...?'

Speaker 4 [00:09:23] Yeah.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:09:25] It was great.

Ella [00:09:25] That's wonderful. It's wonderful that you would so you would share that kind of enthusiasm for poetry with your teachers. Did you share your poetry with your friends when you were younger?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:09:36] Yeah. Or did you keep it personal. Well, a lot of the time in the playground, I was the guy to go to if you wanted to be entertained. And I was making up poems.

Ella [00:09:47] But you would make them up for your friend in the playground.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:09:50] My favourite thing was going up to friends and say 'What's your name?' And if she told me her name, I'd make a poem up about her, to impress her.

Speaker 4 [00:10:05] You know.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:10:07] All the other boys were doing football and all kinds of things. But I was writing poetry.

Ella [00:10:11] I knew. I think you were ahead of your time, Benjamin. I think that nowadays most would agree that writing poetry is very romantic to impress people.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:10:23] I love words, and that's crazy, because we're always using words. But I love playing with words, you know? I love the way that words rhyme. I love the way that if you say words in a different way. Depending on what you say, to give them a different meaning. I mean...

Ella [00:10:43] Me too.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:10:43] If you say. 'I'll give you sweets.' That's one way. Yeah. You know what I mean? Yeah. Or: 'I'll give you sweets.'

Speaker 4 [00:10:53] Yeah.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:10:54] You know, that's not the same meaning of the sentence.

Speaker 4 [00:10:58] Yeah.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:11:01] It's just. It's just a fantastic way of expressing yourself. And the great thing. Another great thing I would say about words is that, and poetry, is that you can be five, six, seven like I was and be a poet. You don't have to wait for the publisher. Yeah, but you just start making poems. And you are a poet.

Ella [00:11:23] But yeah. Yeah, I. Yeah, I completely agree with you. I love playing with words as well. And I love when things rhyme in a really satisfying, neat way. It gives you a little, like, a little thrill of joy when you write something that rhymes really well. And that's what's so wonderful about we about this gorgeous book that you've written. As you say, the lyrics are so poetic, but it also feels like a song. So I wonder if anyone watching or listening would have a go at singing the book and singing Benjamin's words. Because I think when you read it, you'll see that you absolutely could sing it, couldn't you?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:12:03] Well, I couldn't, because if I started singing the Internet network would break down, everybody would crush.

Ella [00:12:10] Well, that's what we need Mona Baptiste for. Okay. Well, I have one more question for you, Benjamin, and then I think we'll have a reading of you reading the book, which is going to be so exciting. But my final question to you is, what is it that inspires you to write your poetry? Is there anything in particular that really makes you want to pick up a pen or get up in front of people and start doing poetry?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:12:38] It's a very small word with a very big meaning: life. I absolutely love life. I love people. I love animals. I will look at a worm in the garden for 10 minutes and just be like where is this worm going. Has he got a girlfriend or a boyfriend? Has he got brothers and sisters? Is it going shopping? When I do jogging and I just love trees, I love the birds and some times I can't understand why other people don't have the love like I have it. Sometimes a lot of people say I'm so childish about it, but I just look, there's a hedgehog in my garden that comes every night.

Ella [00:13:21] Really?

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:13:22] And I just watch it and I just watch it moving around. Yeah. And I'm just I'm just amazed by it, you know. Yeah. And so. When I write poems about war and people who are hungry and I'm writing about racism it's because I want us all to live together, this planet is an amazing thing, kids, you know, we've got to share it and we got to stop fighting because of different colour skin and stop discriminating because you're a girl or a boy. If we live together, it will make the world such a better place. And so life inspires me.

Ella [00:14:02] Wonderful. That seems like the perfect place to pause, because we're now going to head to Benjamin, giving us a reading from his wonderful book. We sang Across the Sea, The Empire Windrush and Me.

Benjamin Zephaniah [00:14:14] I was born on the island of Trinidad in the Caribbean Sea. There was mom and dad. I had four sisters, and my four sisters had me. We used to play in the sunshine. The sun shone all the time. Even when the rains came, the sun was right behind. One day after playing as we ate foods from our trees, we sat on the veranda enjoying the cool breeze. We were five girls, dreaming of what to do when we got older and bigger. But when he came to me, I said. I want to be a singer. I just want to sing. I just want to sing. Singing songs will help me grow. I just want the world to know. Joy is what I bring. So I just want to sing. I started singing on the islands at shows and carnivals. If there were no people, I would sing to all the animals. I used to sing in the mornings. I loved to sing at noon. Singing at night was a great delight. That's when I sang to the moon. Then I heard that the Empire Windrush would sail across the sea that ship was sailing to England. So I told my family, I told them of all the things in England I would like to do, if I could sing in England. It would be a dream come true. So I just want to sing. I just want to sing. Singing songs will help me grow. I just want the world to know. Joy is what I bring. So I just want to sing. My parents said Good luck Mona and take care. As they waved. My sister looked at the great big ship and they were all amazed. As the ship left the dock and we started to sail, Bale waved goodbye. I was a little nervous, a bit lonely. And a tear fell from my eye. There were many on that journey, and they came from many lands. Many of them were musicians, and they played in many bands. So when they asked me who I was and what skill did I bring? I said. My name is Mona Baptist. And I just love to sing. I just want to sing. I just want to sing. Singing songs will help me grow. I just want the world to know. Joy is what I bring. So I just want to sing. When I arrived in England, it was cool. But when the summer came, I started singing everywhere so people would get to know my name. I sang in clubs and on radio to get some recognition. I worked very hard and soon I even sang on television. They called me the singing sensation from far across the sea. My family were proud, and so was I when they talked about me. I sang in Germany. I sang in France. I sang in Ireland, too. But sometimes people still ask me, What did I want to do? I just want to sing. I just want to sing. Singing songs will help me grow. I just want the world to know. Joy is what I bring. So I just want to sing. Sometimes life was tough, but singing helped me get along. As a Caribbean girl, sometimes I just had to be quite strong. Sometimes it could be difficult to just get on the stage. Sometimes I needed someone to help me turn the page. I wanted to sing for the whole world. I wanted to sing for me. That's why I got on the Empire Windrush and sailed across the sea. So when you think of me, remember that I fulfilled my dream. And if you can sing with me, I'm sure. That you'll know just what I mean. I wanted to sing. I just want to sing. Singing really helped me grow. So I wanted the world to know. I did all that travelling because. I just loved to sing.

Ella [00:19:15] Well, that was wonderful. Thank you so much, Benjamin, for sharing that with us. Thank you so much for watching. Joining us for the Reading is Magic Festival.

Benjamin, thank you so much. It's been so lovely to talk to you as ever. Thanks, everybody. Have a great day, good bye.

Lauren [00:19:40] A massive thank you to Benjamin, Ella for a fantastic session. You know, I think maybe we should think about doing more drawings for our friends and families and teachers as a way of saying thank you. Wouldn't that be great? I would love to see your creations, by the way. Do make sure you send them in to us so we can display them in our Creators Gallery. And don't forget, we've got loads more brilliant sessions: storytelling and draw alongs for you. You can check it all out at Reading is Magic festival dot com.