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Cressida Cowell [00:00:14] Hello there, I'm Cressida Cowell the author and illustrator of How to Train Your Dragon, Wizards of Once and Which Way to Anywhere, 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 a laureate and celebrate all the things you have the right to: 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 that. I hope you enjoy this event.

Lauren Layfield [00:01:33] Welcome along to the Reading is Magic Festival. It's Lauren with you. I've got a cream coloured blouse on today. I've got brown straight hair and I'm in front of my amazing Reading is Magic bunting. And it's time for me to introduce my very next guest. His name is Kwame Alexander. He is a bestselling author and poet. And he's going to be talking us through his award winning verse novels, The Crossover, Booked and Rebound. So let's hand over to Kwame.

Janet Smith [00:02:06] Hello everyone and welcome to Reading is Magic and this event with Kwame Alexander. My name is Janet Smith and I'm part of the programme team here at the Reading is Magic Festival and it's very exciting to be talking with Kwame. We're in different parts of the world and I'll tell you in a little moment where exactly we are. But Kwame has written 35 books for young readers, including Swing, Rebound and The Crossover, which is currently being made into a TV series for Disney Plus. So it's very exciting. But his latest book is The Door of No Return, which we'll chat about today. But there's something about Kwame, which I found really inspiring when I was reading all about him before this conversation, and that's something that he said about believing about changing the world. He says, 'change the world one words at a time.' And I think he's definitely made an enormous step in that direction because he's been involved in building a library and a health clinic in Ghana. And we're going to be talking a little bit about Ghana in a little while as well. So I want you to join me in your virtual spaces to say hello to Kwame Alexander. Hi, how are you?

Kwame Alexander [00:03:32] Hello. Hello, everyone. Reading is magic and I am so glad to be here with Janet, the magician who's going to pull some rabbits out of the hat. And that's a metaphor, and we're going to have a great time. So excited.

Janet Smith [00:03:46] It's just as well that's a metaphor. I have no rabbits to pull from any hats. So I mean, where are you at the moment?

Kwame Alexander [00:03:56] I am in New Orleans, Louisiana, and I have been here since May, and I will be leaving next week because we will have finished filming the television series of The Crossover. Eight episodes.

Janet Smith [00:04:11] Ah, that's very exciting. And I'm in Toronto in Canada, which I think is what makes this this virtual world and these virtual book festivals so exciting. We can literally be anywhere. So that's magic. That's magic as well. So, Kwame, can you tell us a little bit about you as an author? Because for me, there is one thing that really stands out with your writing from most of the other books I read, and that is the way in which you

write them, the style you write them. So for those who as yet haven't come across your work, haven't got to reading your books. Tell us a little bit about your writing style as an author, please.

Kwame Alexander [00:04:57] I write novels. I love telling stories with beginnings, middles and ends. I love using sports as a metaphor. Whether it's basketball or football or tennis or swimming. I love writing stories that I would have wanted to have read when I was a young student. I love writing stories in verse form. I know you're like, like what's that? Okay. So I started off as a poet in my career writing poetry, very short lines, very short stories, very, you know, a lot of a lot of really cool words, but not too many words like the right words in the right order. I started off writing poetry, and so when I wanted to tell stories, write novels, I decided I was going to tell stories through poems. So I write what's called novels in verse. So you'll notice there's not a lot of words on the page. Right. Is a lot of white space because I feel like in poetry you can say a whole lot in very few words. So that's sort of my style of writing. I also write graphic novels. I take some of my novels in verse and I turn them into graphic novels. So it's still poetry and it's still a story. But now we've got illustrations to go along with the comics, as it were. So that's sort of my style of writing. That's how I've always sort of loved telling stories is through poetry.

Janet Smith [00:06:31] And so now that you have the books being made into TV series, is that quite an easy step for you? Because, again, it's all about the less is more, I guess.

Kwame Alexander [00:06:44] Absolutely. I feel like, you know, going from a novel in verse to a screenplay or a TV script is so much easier because you're already... You know, with poetry, you're already getting rid of the words that don't need to be there. You're already tightening it up. So it definitely made it easier. The hard the hardest part of of turning your story into a TV show is dealing with all the executives who think they know better than the author. No, they do not know better than the author.

Janet Smith [00:07:20] It's always like that. And so when I think, or previous to the new novel, when I think of you, I always think of stories that are set in urban cityscapes where the characters are from kind of here and now. But the new book takes us into a very different place. Can you tell us a little bit about The Door of no Return?

Kwame Alexander [00:07:46] Sure. The Door no Return is book number 36. Wow. I've been writing a long time.

Janet Smith [00:07:53] Yeah.

Kwame Alexander [00:07:54] When people ask me what The Door of No Return is about, it's about a 12 year old boy who likes a girl. And he has a cousin who likes the same girl and his cousin is a bully. And the cousin beats him in everything, in racing, in wrestling. But he figured out a way to finally beat his cousin in something because he's a good swimmer. And so he challenges his cousin to this big swim-off. And he feels like if he beats his cousin swimming, then he'll win the heart of the girl. So he's practising and every day he's going to the river and he's getting his strokes like. There he's fast. He kicks like a fish. And the night before the big swim-off. He goes down to the river to get one more practise session in. Even though he's been told to stay out of the river at night because the water is cursed. So he's in the water. He's in the water. He's swimming, he's excited. And he comes out of the water. And I can't tell ya'll what happens next. But I will say this. It's set in Ghana, in West Africa, and it's historical fiction. So what happens when he comes out of the water, changes his life and the course of history forever.

Janet Smith [00:09:35] Yes. Yeah.

Kwame Alexander [00:09:37] The story is really about, you know, when you're faced with. You know, a door of no return. How do you. How do you rebound? But how do you still find your way in this world? So it is one of those st... It was the hardest story I ever wrote. Definitely. But that's what it's about.

Janet Smith [00:10:03] Why is it the hardest story you ever wrote?

Kwame Alexander [00:10:06] I think it was the hardest story I wrote because I knew where the book where the story was headed. And even though I didn't get to this sort of. I don't want to give it away. But I will say, you know, this book is is is going to deal with some tragedy and triumph. And so when I got to the part in the book where it got really hard, which is around page three-o-two. Like I knew where that, where it was headed. And so I dreaded getting to that page and having to write that part of the story. Oh, I had to start writing. Take a break, go for a walk, drink some tea. Anything I had to do, because, yeah, it's a hard story to tell. And I think when you read it, this is book one of a trilogy. Yeah, you see what I'm saying?

Janet Smith [00:10:58] Mm hmm. So that's interesting what you just said that with this book, you knew where you were going. So does that mean with the other books, you don't have a confirmed idea of where the narratives is taking you?

Kwame Alexander [00:11:12] Yeah, I know exactly where it's going. I have to know where it's going to end when I start. I have to or I can't start it. The thing about this book is where it was ending. It was going to be painful.

Janet Smith [00:11:24] Yeah. Yeah.

Kwame Alexander [00:11:25] In a way that no other book I've written has been. So with that knowledge. It was hard to sit down every morning and write. No matter how fun or funny or happy the scene was that I was working on that day.

Janet Smith [00:11:41] Yeah.

Kwame Alexander [00:11:42] I knew where I was going.

Janet Smith [00:11:44] Yeah.

Kwame Alexander [00:11:45] You know?

Janet Smith [00:11:47] Yeah. That must've been a kind of really bitter sweet writing process for you then.

Kwame Alexander [00:11:52] And I, I. I'm a big fan of hope. And Joy. And I was trying to figure out how do I write this book and still be authentic and true to that part of me? And so I like to think, Janet. I like to think that by that last page in the book the reader is left with some sense of hope.

Janet Smith [00:12:21] Mm hmm.

Kwame Alexander [00:12:22] That's that's that was that was that was that was my goal. I had to get back there, so. You know, and that's why it's a trilogy, because maybe the real hope and joy and the kindness and the fun and all that won't return until book three. Who knows?

Janet Smith [00:12:37] Yeah, the characters are brilliant and there's some really lovely, funny scenes and also the the playfulness of the language and and also the the kind of the storytelling amongst the family members that that for me, for me there were laugh out loud moments as I was reading the book. But I think you're going to read us a little bit from it now so we can get a real feel for the setting and the characters. If you'd like to do that, that'd be brilliant.

Kwame Alexander [00:13:13] My cousin doesn't walk around. He marches. Thinks he is a soldier. He's stronger and taller than me by two coconuts, which I have seen him split open with his hard head. Then offer it to whichever girl he is fond of at the time. He outran me last spring from the village to the river's edge and is so big and so tough he is allowed to chop timber with the big men. But none of that matters right now because the girl that I like, Ama, has been disrespected by my cousin. Her honour plunged into the damp red clay. And I think I understand what Shakespeare meant when he said love never did run smooth. Forget peace. This means war. I run into him head first with the force of a million thunderstorms and knock him down. I do not need my brother to train me. I think I am an able hawk hunting my prey. The thud of my cousins back slapping the wet ground delights me. Tightens my will, brings a loud silence and sends the heads of my schoolmates jerking back in disbelief. This had been my strategy in the few moments that my heart grabbed all common sense and held it hostage. Catch him off guard, attack like a wildcat, straight and quick, injure him just enough so he cannot retaliate, do any more damage to her. To me. Would it not been my plan? Was my cousin lying there dead? Then coughing his way back to life. And laughing. And jumping up. Wiping the mud from the back. Wagging his finger at me. Then chanting the war song. That everyone knew and loved and shouted back to him. Ose yie, ose yie, ose yie, ose yie, ose yie. Ose yie. And when the singing stopped. The silence erupted. Yeah. So there's a little bit of a scene between the two cousins, the bully and the main character.

Janet Smith [00:15:57] But even that scene, 'cause that's really a really tense scene, even in that I laughed at the coconut splitting. Right. You know, it was it's just so, so brilliant and just that that visual image of just, you know, absolutely nutting a coconut, as we say in Scotland. So can I ask why Ghana? What does Ghana mean to you?

Kwame Alexander [00:16:26] Well, you know, I've been to Ghana 11 times. I spent a lot of time there. I built a library in Ghana and a health clinic in Ghana. I have a lot of friends there, people I love and I've often felt like the story of black people. The history of black people is often forgotten, and that many times we think the story of black people began in America. Or Great Britain. Or Jamaica. Or Trinidad. Or so there are these sort of places around the world where we think black people began. And I know and you know and we know that is not true, that the origin story of black people is in Africa. Like that's where our ancestors came from. And so I wanted to write the story to talk about the actual origins of black people, where we came from before we were dispersed, taken, kidnapped, stolen, and and placed in these different places around the world. And so it was important to me to write that story. And I thought Ghana would be a good sort of place to start.

Janet Smith [00:17:53] Yeah. Yeah. And I think for me, that that was a really fascinating insight into a part of the Ghanaian history that I don't think for a lot of people, they have

much knowledge of how the country developed and evolved and, you know, who came and colonised it and what changed it and the shift in religion and language and that is a really important part of the book is is the language that the characters are not allowed to speak. Can you tell us a little bit about that? Because I find that really hard to to read.

Kwame Alexander [00:18:38] Absolutely not. I don't want to give away. You got to read the book. But I will say yes, Janet, you're right. I mean, one of the ways that we begin to appreciate each other is that we learn about each other's communities. We learn about each other's customs and cultures. If we don't know. Then we can't believe and feel. If we don't have an understanding of other's sort of experiences, then we don't have a connexion. And so writing this book is my way of sort of offering a door for people to walk through and get a connexion that will fuel their imaginations. You know, that's that's sort of what I was trying to do here is is say that look black people dance, hope, laugh, dream, love, eat, smile, cry, live, die, just like everybody else. When we're kids, we're all kids trying to figure out how to have fun, how to not get in trouble, how to get away with stuff like, you know, we all do it. And so I wanted to write that kind of story and I completely forgot the question. I got off. But I felt like it was such a good question. I want to make sure I answered it. All right. So ask me again. I'll act like I didn't talk.

Janet Smith [00:20:15] No, you answered it, it's fine.

Kwame Alexander [00:20:16] Okay, good.

Janet Smith [00:20:18] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So final question. All the books have different sports in them. What's your favourite sport?

Kwame Alexander [00:20:30] My favourite sport is tennis.

Janet Smith [00:20:33] Oh, interesting.

Kwame Alexander [00:20:35] I played tennis in high school and college and so I love tennis. I haven't played in a long time, but I think my favourite sport is now becoming volleyball because my daughter plays volleyball. And I always love watching basketball. In fact, I'm a huge fan of LeBron James and LeBron James is one of the producers of The Crossover TV series on Disney Plus. So that's pretty cool.

Janet Smith [00:21:01] Yeah. Yeah. And do you still play tennis then?

Kwame Alexander [00:21:07] I haven't played in a long time. So, no, no, no. I'm just a big fan of watching it now.

Janet Smith [00:21:17] That is our time.

Kwame Alexander [00:21:20] What is over? The magic is done? Oh.

Janet Smith [00:21:24] Well.

Kwame Alexander [00:21:25] Reading is cool. Reading is fun. Reading is reading is heart warming. Reading is heartbreaking. Reading is sad. Reading is joy. Reading is kind. Reading is imaginative. Reading is magic.

Janet Smith [00:21:47] It is, it's been pretty magic chatting with you this morning. And I should also let everyone know that as we chat today is Kwame's birthday, so. Happy birthday for Kwame, so thank you so much for taking the time and chatting for Reading is Magic.

Janet Smith [00:22:05] Thank you Janet.

Janet Smith [00:22:05] Yeah. And it'd be lovely to see you in another virtual space, if not in an actual space in a big festival somewhere in the world.

Kwame Alexander [00:22:16] Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed. Thank you very much for having me.

Janet Smith [00:22:19] Thank you.

Lauren Layfield [00:22:29] Amazing. Thank you so much, Kwame, for telling us all about how you managed to fuse sports with poetry. And if you want to check out Kwame's latest book, you can head over to the reading is magic website where you can buy a copy. Or how about you check out your local library to see if you can borrow it. Also, thank you to Janet for hosting. It's been brilliant learning how to connect stories on paper with the modern world. And I'll see you next time.