

**Antoinette Scully 0:16**

Welcome to In Conversation, a podcast from Black and Bookish. I'm your host Antoinette Scully. Each week I interview Black authors and creators about their work and inspirations, all at the intersection of Black literary arts. This week's episode featured authors Kwame Mbalia and Prince Joel Makonnen, co-authors of the Last Gate of the Emperor. Kwame Mbalia is the author of the Tristan Strong series and editor of Black Boy Joy. Prince Joel Makonnen is an attorney, filmmaker, and the great-grandson of the last emperor of Ethiopia. In this episode, we cover several key topics, including how the co-authors' backgrounds play into the story they wrote together, the intersection between literature, history, and culture, the process and love of writing for middle grades audiences, and lots more. So sit back and enjoy.

So I wanted to welcome you, I'm so happy that I get a chance to talk to you both about this amazing book, and about literature and you know, Black culture and any of those kinds of things. Black and bookish is focused on not just Black literary arts, but the activism behind it. The cultural aspects of being a Black bookish person. And so all of those kind of intertwine in the work that I do and the question that I'll have for you today, so it won't just be like, well, how did you get your book published? Because, you know, I mean, hopefully, I have questions that haven't been asked, and they'll be a fun and interesting sort of take on things. So the first thing I would love to do is to get to know both of you a little bit better. And then in that process, asked how you came to co-write this book together?

**Prince Joel Makonnen 2:04**

Yeah, sure. So hi, Antoinette. Happy to be Black and bookish. Thanks for having us, I'm Prince Joel, and I'm an attorney by day and an author/filmmaker by night. And I guess a prince 24/seven, and I am the co-author with my fabulous co-author Kwame Mbalia on Last Gate of the Emperor, which we can't wait for people to discover. It's really a fresh story with a really compelling protagonist that I think everybody's gonna love. And we just can't wait for everybody to just discover and go on this adventure.

**Kwame Mbalia 2:41**

Yeah, my name is Kwame Mbalia, I am the author of the Tristan Strong series, the co-author of the Last Gate of the Emperor with Prince Joel Makonnen that comes out in one week, from the day that we're recording this, and I'm the editor of Black Boy Joy, which comes out later on this summer. And Joel and I met through a mutual friend, a tiny, feisty, angry mutual friend, who, who hooked us up and what did we do? Were we, did we have sake that day?

**Prince Joel Makonnen 3:23**

We did, definitely. Great sushi, too.

**Kwame Mbalia 3:28**

Great friendships bloom over sushi and sake; it's a known fact. It's a well-known fact. But I mean, we couldn't be more excited about bringing this book to you, I think it's going to be I've always had a love of sci-fi. I love the medium, the, the middle-grade audience because that is probably where my maturity level capped. And so I think it'll be fun like Joel said; it'll be fresh.

It'll be exciting. It'll be fun. It'll be an adventure that I think everyone can really hop on board and come along for the ride.

**Antoinette Scully 4:06**

So one of my questions is always: how does your background, where you grew up, sort of play into the story that you've written? And I know that there's talk of that on Joel's part of, you know, having this kingdom without a place to be idea in the same process, but I don't have that information for you Kwame, so how does your background play into the type of literature that you write and then how this story came into play?

**Kwame Mbalia 4:34**

For me, my, my parents are superstars; they're awesome. They made sure that they scoured the planet because you know, they would travel internationally sometimes for... they're professors and they had exchange programs with different universities in Africa: one in Ethiopia, one in Accra, Ghana, and they would you know, they would travel and so when they would travel, they would make sure to bring back books that centered around, you know, stories dealing with the African diaspora, right. So I always I grew up in a pan-African household. And so when I'm writing, I always infuse, I can't help it, you know, I always infuse my writing with that, a pan African worldview, right, where there's this, you know, even even in, you know, when we talk about fantasy, or you know, alternative history or sci-fi, there's always some element of the African diaspora that is seeping through, right? I don't care if it doesn't make sense. There's, there's, like, jollof rice appears in all of my stories, I can't help it. It's just, it's just there. I don't care if it doesn't make sense in the framework of the actual story. You know, we're using the powers of handwavium, jollof rice appears. And so just like plantains and stuff, like different elements of the diaspora, I can't help it and, and when writing a book, that's sci-fi, where we get to extrapolate forward that not only the technologies of today but also you know, the cultures and how the cultures evolved. I feel like we always have to just, it's a, it's a fresh start, it's a, it's a chance to say, Hey, you know, at this point in the future, this type of bigotry is completely gone, it's eliminated, and we just get to play in this space, right? I feel like I owe it to not only the readers of today but the readers of tomorrow, to kind of show what that future could be. And that's what I think the beauty of sci-fi is and or at least and the way that I've read and written, you know, sci-fi is that we get to, you know, just imagine a future. And why handicap ourselves when we're doing our imagining, right, just let our minds run wild, eliminate bigotry, and you know, play have a fun adventure. That's, that's usually my writing. lots of crying too, over, you know, any rough draft at

**Antoinette Scully 5:52**

Joel, I'd love to hear your perspective as well.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 7:10**

Yeah, sure. So yeah, To start off, as you mentioned, obviously, the beginning kind of the nascent part of the idea for the story was our mutual friend, actually, I was talking about, you know, I really want to write the story about how, you know, my family's legacy and just kind of being out of place after the revolution happened in Ethiopia. And kind of this life in exile and being

disconnected from your home country, and the feelings that you have as a child about that, and trying to make sense of the world. And, you know, that's pretty heavy. And you're like, Okay, let's do it, like in a children's book more, more, you know, accessible, so that more people can enjoy it and make it fun. And so it was perfect when she said, you know, you have to meet Kwame; he's awesome. And, you know, we totally hit it off when we met and I really loved how much he knew about Africa. And he told me about how he was raised in this house where they really made a point to kind of be steeped in African history. So it was it was, it was right away a connection because he knew about Ethiopia about Emperor Haile Selassie; there's a painting, I should always announce him because he's very ominous there. But yes, he's always here, watching over me. And you know, when I told Kwame, he knew of it, obviously, about the royal family, about Ethiopia, the history. And so it kind of started there. But it was to be an encompassing story for Africa in general and give it a sense of history that, you know, a lot of narratives say that Africa doesn't have that long history, or that it's not written and therefore, it's not really you know, comparable. And so to broaden and up this, we, you know, worked with Ethiopia as a, as a background, because there is such a long and rich history. And obviously, I'm part of it. So I wanted to view a lot of that legacy in it. But definitely, this is for the African diaspora just to reconnect your roots. And basically, that's kind of the, the theme of the book with our with our protagonist is kind of being disconnected out of place, and how do you reconnect to this history. And so that's why I was so much fun. And then, you know, meeting Kwame, he loves video games, he's like we have video games in here, you know, it's gonna be fun. And there's gonna be little nuggets of history that you can pick up. But that's the best way to learn is when you're having fun. You're not even knowing that you're really learning. And so that's what we really put together. That's why I thought it was a perfect collaboration. I'm so happy and proud of what we did. And it really came out even better than I thought. And I'm just really happy to see my country highlighted and referenced and kind of the spotlight on it makes me happy for you know, representation obviously for Ethiopians, Ethiopian-Americans, and just Black people all over the world because I know that Ethiopia has always had this symbol of kind of a central place for, for the Black identity, you know, especially in the beginning of last century. I know that There's a lot of writers and intellectuals that talked about it. So it's all encapsulated in this book, you see, it seems like a very like innocent book for children. And it's all fun, but there's actually a bigger purpose behind it. And I know me and Kwame share that mission. So it was like fake, put us together. And we were able to accomplish so much. And make it such a fun story too.

**Antoinette Scully 10:21**

I want to expand on that idea of sort of this intersection between literature and maybe even history. Was that something that you thought of even within those first couple of drafts? Or did you see that it started to become part of the story and you thought, well, we should do more of that? Or did you have to take some of it out? Like, how did you decide how intertwined the historical bits came with the Afrofuturism and the building the world itself?

**Prince Joel Makonnen 10:48**

Yeah, well, I'll just start by saying, I had like this massive data dump of everything I know about Ethiopian history and the things I thought would be really cool in there. But obviously, once you

start collaborating, Kwame really did a good job of kind of sorting through and saying, Okay, this is good, you know, let's do some food references, some history, some, you know, marketplace, and I think that's really worked out because obviously, it can be to like an encyclopedia, or else you know, you're just like, you know, didactically teaching people about other culture. But I think I'll pass it over to Kwame because I think he that was the good exchange that we had is was let's do some real references. But also, let's keep the story fun. Let's have some video games and have adventure, sci-fi, flying skysails, and but the name of the things that we use, for instance, I'll give an example is nafasi, which means it's like a kite like a flying kite. And Kwame had this great idea of making that like a backpack with thrusters that name it a nafasi that does have the same purpose of flying. But it's also just a cool element of the story. So I think a lot of that, that's kind of the process that, that we went through, and it worked out, I think, what do you think, Kwame?

**Kwame Mbalia 11:52**

Yeah, it's, exactly. Or for, like, for me, when I'm writing, I think any writer will say that. And, you know, for those rough drafts, right, you're just trying to get the story out. And then through the process of revision and refining, you know, it becomes more specific, and while also becoming more and more knowledgeable about the world that you're trying to describe, right. So you know, in the beginning, the very first draft, we will have an anti-gravity backpack, right, we'll just call it an anti-gravity backpack, an AGB, and we'll just keep it moving, right. And for nine out of the 10 stories, you, we could just leave it like that, give it an acronym, and just keep it moving. But when you're trying to, when you're trying to steep something in culture, right. And to express your admiration and your love of that culture. It's not just enough. And so as a writer, we then we get more specific because in becoming more specific, we're also doing more world-building, right? Not just for the book itself, but for the reader. Because the reader then says nafasi Oh, you know, that's pretty cool. Right? Awesome. And we'll keep reading or they might, I don't know that word. Let me Google it, right. And then through that, we can begin to understand more and more of the culture that is infused in the book. And that's the way that I think reading becomes fun because you can, if you don't know a word, you can kind of you pick up through the context what it is right. And, you know, in the middle-grade age range, where we do a little more description, too. So you know, we say it's a nafasi, you know, we say we have the backpack straps. And so the reader knows, oh, okay, it's a backpack, but it can fly. That's really cool. I have backpacks I go to school, I really wish I could fly. And then we keep reading throughout the book, right? So they can do that, they can stop and explore. It's also what I like to call a springboard or an anchor point, depending on how I'm describing it for teachers, for parents, for book club leaders to then talk about what this is and what it means. We then begin to introduce a different language for students to become more familiar with the research right? And so there's all these little possible springboards for readers to, to just jump off and learn more about the inspiration for some of this book. Right another example where I mean we're in the future, there's a lot of spaceships and stuff, you got to figure out a way to talk about you know, jump drives, warping, you know, hyperspace, different media, properties, all those different things, right. And we have an--I can't spoil the story for you, right. But we have several, you know, different called, you know, engines for lack of a better word in the book, or the spaceships. And they got to be named something, you know, everyone names, you know, that's,

everyone names their discoveries, their inventions. Then why not, you know, again, infuse it with more culture, we have to name the spaceship, right. Why not, again, infuse it with more culture? And so, you know, it becomes this thing where we have this really, I don't want to call it generic. Right. But we have a story, right and for all intents and purposes, it's a great story. It's a great adventure, but we begin to add more depth to it and begin to add more exploration to it by infusing it with culture. And that's the beauty of writing, right? That's why I love revising. And I tell, you know, different aspiring writers and current writers to fall in love with revision because through the revision process, we get to specify and also expand at the same time, and it just makes the book that much better.

**Antoinette Scully 15:33**

Did you, Joel, have to be convinced that this could be sci-fi? Or did you go into it going, "Yeah, no, I totally see it right? Like we're there"?

**Prince Joel Makonnen 15:43**

Yeah, yeah, no, obviously. Yeah, no, I totally saw it actually. Because just Black Panther had just come out also, like, maybe a year before, like, a few months before me and Kwame met, actually. So there was definitely that at back our mind, we're like, yeah, we can do our own take on the Wakanda. But you know what, this is gonna be the real place--Ethiopia. People can refer to it; it's not a fictional place. But I think throwing it in the future like Kwame said, it's, it's the realm of possibilities. Anything is possible. We're not really restricted to having to follow what's in existence. We can take some of these things in existence, extrapolate, think of different ways those things can develop. And some of them, I think, are pretty fairly reasonable, in a sense, and in the sense that I could totally see them happening even and especially in Africa, so I was totally into it. And the minute we kind of, you know, got, got into that space of Afrofuturist and, and kind of like a future of Africa. Yeah, we're both really like excited about all that we could do now.

**Antoinette Scully 16:51**

Afrofuturism is actually one of my favorite genres. I'm a huge Octavia Butler fan. And so when I think about doing this kind of reading and bringing people into this, for me, I like to call myself a futurist. Because you have to have that imagination to see where you're going. And so I wonder, like, in your, in your past, or even in your work, how do you continue to bring people along with that futuristic idea, with that imagination, especially at this age level, so that people can continue to build better worlds?

**Kwame Mbalia 17:24**

There's, there's two, two answers to that question, then I think they work in tandem. The first thing, you know, is to have, need an enjoyable story, right? Especially when you're talking about for the middle-grade audience, we're looking at, we're competing with, you know, so many different avenues for their attention. And so the first thing first is the story has to be fun, it has to be exciting and fresh, it has to, you know, the characters have to be people or characters that they can empathize. Right? And so we have to speak to them, and not speak at them. When we're telling these stories, I think that's the mark of a good storyteller is, you know, adapting to

whatever audience they're speaking to, to make the audience feel engaged. And, and the other part, like, on the complete opposite side of the hemisphere to that question is that more people, not just Africans or people from the African diaspora, but everyone, they learn and come along for the ride as more stories get spread, right. As the stories travel, more people read about them, more people expand, you know, get wrinkles in the brains, as my wife likes to say. They begin to look and hunger for more of these stories. And so that's why I think Black Panther is was not, is not, and was not the first Afrofuturist you know, movie, story, or what have you, right? It wasn't, but it injected this energy into stories, you know, and to the general populace for more stories about Afrofuturism, right, that they begin to hunger and look for the story. So when you have this hunger and people looking for these stories, and you're telling a great story and a great adventure, the people--they come along for the ride, right? They learn more, and as they learn more, they want more. Right. And so it is incumbent, it's not on the authors, it's not on the writers because the writers, the producers, the creators, the artists, they're out there making this, right. It is then it is incumbent upon the industry, the publishing market as a platform to give these creators this space and the attention and the money behind it to promote it, to get it to the people who are looking for them. My attention span has a goldfish memory, right. My attention span is incredibly fleeting, which you know can say a lot about me and, and my dedication or what have you. But if I can't get to something, there's something else that's clamoring for my attention, including one of the four kids running around upstairs above my head, there's something that's clamoring for my attention. And so if I can't get access to something, if you don't make it easy for me to gain access to something, you know, nine times out of 10, I'm gonna forget about it and go look for something else. And that's everyone. That's every consumer out there. So if we, as a publishing industry, aren't making it easy for people to find these stories and embrace them, they're not going to come along for the ride. Right? And that is my-- let me get off of my soapbox because I can talk about that for hours.

### **Prince Joel Makonnen 20:38**

Yeah, no, I totally agree. Those stories are out there. And, and, you know, young, African creators, people of color have been imagining the future in stories for since you know, the dawn of times, right. And you mentioned Octavia Butler, which is a fantastic author, and I love how in her time she was writing about, and that's what I was trying to say about Last Gate of the Emperor, where it could happen. And there's so many things that she really predicted almost to a tee. And what I love about that is that, like I was saying, I think especially Africans, we've been imagining settings in the futures with stories that go, you know, 100 years, 1000 years in the future, but they're not really that accessible. I feel like we are lucky, us who are kind of in the milieu, we get to find them or friends tell us about them. I remember even before Black Panther movie came out, I have a good friend who started a comic book series with Ethiopian superhero character, both a male and a female. And now he took off, he has a series, he's, he's writing number three on both of the books, but not a lot of people know about it. And same thing with young creators in, you know, in Africa and South Africa, Nigeria, there was actually a TV documentary I was watching, they were showing how all these kids were just with their cell phones are creating these amazing like Afrofuturist like films with like cyborgs, you know. And they're just using the effects of their little apps. And they can be in these local kinds of film festivals or small competitions. And they're just phenomenal. And I think that's the one thing that

I find really admirable and unique about our people from Africa and the diaspora is that we can take very small things and make it work. I mean, they just, they literally had a phone, it was cracked. And they made a film with it. And it was just amazing. I feel like we have an intuition for these technologies and what they can do. And we're constantly imagining ourselves in the future, you know, where our country is going to go maybe, you know, imagine in a different setting with different, I don't know, government, democracy or whatever you're you're imagining, or like a plutocracy. There's no limits to it. And it's just that we need to make them available. So I totally echo what Kwame is saying; I think the publishing industry just needs to uplift these because the people out there want to read them, not just Black people, people from everywhere. We want to see Africa all types of different ways, not not in the way that it's always portrayed in the media. When there's news, it's always bad news, right? But there's so many great things happening. So many great historical facts, great creators talking about stories of today, of yesterday, and tomorrow. They just need to be made accessible. The stories are there. So I think it's part of our job to do that. And just make sure people know about them.

**Kwame Mbalia 23:26**

What you're talking about, right there, Joel, it's what's happened, you know, what is the, what is the difference? It's that cell phones, smartphones have become commonplace, right? Because the, you know, the prices have gone down, meaning more people have access to them, right? They have access to this technology. And now that they have this access to this technology, they can film these movies, they can have an outlet for their creativity, right? They have access, and you just imagine, hey, 20 years ago, what would it have been like if, you know, creators had had that access? What sort of boost to, you know, the media properties will we be seeing right now? And we can, that's why we continue to hammer that point. Now the creativity that you're seeing, I'm on, I'm on, I was on Tik Tok way too much, these days, way too much, because the creativity that they're doing in 15, and 60-second loops is astounding, right? And, and the apps are becoming more intuitive and more powerful, and they're able to generate higher quality productions, right? And it's just like, imagine if we gave them, you know, equipment and funding just to make what they're envisioning, right, the landscape of entertainment would be, would be absolutely ridiculous. And that's what--we were just trying to do that. We're just trying to lift up all of these other creators. It's a long process. It's a slow process, but you know, we're gonna get there. We're gonna get there.

**Antoinette Scully 24:52**

So I'm gonna ask you to kind of step back onto your soapbox because I saw where you were going and my questions for you right? Like there's no way to talk to a Black writer without talking about the limitations of mainstream publishing. And I want to know how, how difficult, or how easy it was to get this book from this beautiful idea to this amazing product that's going to be released in a week.

**Kwame Mbalia 25:18**

Again, I think it's, it's, I've been incredibly fortunate in my publishing career to seem to meet the right people, you know, Joel is just an example of that. But this, you know, it came off the the heels of, you know, writing Tristan Strong and the, a lot of the enjoyment that people gained

from reading that book, right? Learning--I shouldn't say learning. I feel like some people learn every day, just how much buying power and desire the African diaspora has. I'm specifically talking about the African diaspora, but every culture has to see their own culture in media properties, right. We will pay. We will pay. I will throw money. I know lots of people will throw money to see their stories, stories about them, centering them on the screen, in the books and comic books, on TV. It feels like, you know, a constant uphill battle pushing the boulder to try and get people to recognize that change is happening. It's slow, right? And there's always room for improvement, lots, lots, and lots of improvements. But people, the people wanted this book, publishers wanted this book. And because again, the story, I think I you know, I might be biased, but the story is fantastic. The setting is imaginative and wonderful. And there's such a, you know, there's so many different opportunities to create, to explore this space that, you know, we've we've created. And so, you know, we were fortunate, like people were really hungry for this book. And I think that the reading public will also enjoy it, and hopefully pass it along. The way that I think you know, and I think Joel thinks this story is meant to be enjoyed.

### **Prince Joel Makonnen 27:07**

Yeah, I agree. I mean, I feel so grateful for the reception we got, you know, we're so thrilled to be published with Scholastic. They were like, I mean, from the beginning, they were just like, really excited. And you know, as much as there's a time to complain and say, you know, this is hard. And you know, people are not listening to us. I have to say, at this particular time, it really a lot of great things came together at the right time. I feel it was kind of like, you know, just the right people at the right time. Although I will say that without naming, naming names, but Kwame and I, we did get one turn-down initially. I remember one of the comments was "Guys, not really African enough" or something like that. But anyway, well, we push that to the side. And you know, Kwame and I and the team we had behind us was working with us where we were, we were all, we really believed in it. And I think it came across so I have to say that folks at Scholastic and even other publishers were really interested. And like, and like Kwame said, I think that there's sometimes a level, level playing field is when you just come with like a great story. There's no more excuses to be made, "oh, this is not going to appeal to people. This is not..." No, this is a great story. It's fun; it has universal theme. it, you know, centers and highlights a specific culture. It's not really been done before in this way. And it hasn't, you know, Ethiopia as a country really, I feel hasn't been done justice in that sense, where it has just as long history as many other countries that you know, are time and overdone, you know, the British Empire. You know, the the Greeks, you know, we've we've seen how many of those? Where, we have just as comparable and if not longer history, and just plenty of great traditions and folklore that are fun stories about monsters and things that people relate the world over. And so I think that sometimes it's just undeniable, what you put together. And I know that the belief Kwame, and I was undeniable and probably contagious because we really believed in this. And we were like, we're gonna take it all the way and this is going to get published. And we really are grateful and prayed that it would be done in a big way. And so I think we both feel really fortunate for that.



**Antoinette Scully 29:22**

We've talked a lot about your love of middle grade. Is there a spot of writing for adults? is there you know, a YA story that's a little bit older in there? What what are your sort of next projects and whether those are going to be within the same realm? Not a lot of people like little grades. I mean, I'm not I won't even say that. A lot of people who teach middle schoolers don't like middle grades. And so I'd love to hear your love of children in that age range.

**Kwame Mbalia 29:54**

I think the middle-grade age range is fantastic, and I'm wondering, you know, this is just me speculating, and actually, the first time vocalizing it, but I thought about, you know, there was this movement from...as the as the YA category became, specifically the YA fantasy, but, you know, generally, the the the YA age range in general, you know, became more prolific, you saw more adults, you know, reading the the YA stories, just because there was--just in my personal opinion, you know--the there was more expansive, more focus, they were becoming more prolific; we tackle different topics, right. And they, they were just enjoyable. And I'm seeing the same thing happen in the middle grade, you know, age range, where I feel like the middle grade is, is one of the first stages of age range where the stories become complex, right, characters become complex, but it's still fun, right? It's still fun, it's still enjoyable, which is one of the reasons I really love writing middle grade is because you're allowed to be silly. And I think the world needs a good injection of silliness to along with, you know, it's a balance with all the seriousness that goes on. And middle grade, the middle-grade books, you know, tend to be one of the the, the characters are beginning to learn more of the world outside of what they immediately were, you know, grow up, had grown up in right? They begin to explore more, and I feel like people like to, you know, revisit that, that feeling of wonder, that sense of exploration, exploration for the first time, right, they want to recapture that. Because there's nothing like seeing a new place for the first time and being filled with excitement and wonder, right? Like, it's one of like, it's one of the reasons why, you know, I would use, I don't do it anymore, but I would like, you know, "Hey, you know, kid of mine, let's go watch, you know, that new kids' movie that just came out right now." And they're like "I don't wanna!" And I'm like, "I want to! Let me recapture that wonder!" And I feel like that's, that's what's happening with middle grade. And that's one reason why I enjoy writing it because we get to explore complex things, while still putting poop jokes in the book. Right? Like, that's the best of both worlds, right? Talking, talking about the different stages of grief and balancing it with happiness and joy, right, and how we can navigate from one to the other, and then slipping poop jokes inside of it. That's a win. That's a win for everyone. Right? And I... that's my soapbox. I'm not getting off of that soapbox.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 32:45**

Yeah, it's, it's, it's, it's really so much fun. And, and I have to say, I don't have that much experience. Kwame is a multi-book author of a middle grade, but and I admit that my first one was reading was actually Tristan Strong. And I really loved it. And I just remember initially thinking, "Okay, writing a children's book will be much easier, because it's, you know, I don't have to, like make these grand statements or, or these like very, you know, detailed, nuanced, you know, paragraphs about this, and that." And then when we started doing the first drafts, I remember reading and saying, "Oh, actually, it's hard." Because there's, you also have to

challenge yourself to make these, you know, themes or certain truths about life, quote, unquote, in a very simple way, which, which is a great challenge for adults, because I think that when you can express an idea and go on for four or five hours talking about it, it's you know, you don't have any limitation, but I feel like, it brings you back to kind of in the childlike mind state where it's like certain things that sound very simple and true, usually kind of, you know, they last, they, you know, they stand the test of time. As we grow, as adults, we try to add so much complexity to things, which you know, and most times it's warranted, but there's also certain truths of life that hit you because they're just so pretty straightforward. And they could come out of the out of the mouth of a kid who's like nine years old. And so I think that was the challenge. It seems easy, but it's actually not when you want to still be fun. You don't want to sound like you're talking down to kids either. Like Kwame said, we use a lot of like language and we wanted to challenge them even if the word is not readily apparent. You know, maybe do a little research or within the context, you'll get it. But it's kind of striking that balance where you're you're you're still conveying a really potent story, but you also have to kind of pare down your your punch lines and your and your and your truth about your story. So middle grade, I will say is really an art and and I tip my hat to you, Kwame, and all middle-grade authors. Because of all my first foray, I came in thinking, "Oh, it will be so easy," but there's a lot of technique to it. And and I think it enriches you as as a writer and just as a as a, you know, creator.

**Kwame Mbalia 35:12**

To your point, Joel, I think a month ago, my 10-year-old daughter was like, I don't know, I don't know if we were in the car or what we were doing. She was like, "Dad if atoms don't touch...We're all made of atoms...How do we feel anything?" I'm just like, "Yeah, I don't know." Right. And then she goes, you know, skipping off to doodle kawaii anime characters. And I'm just like, yeah, that's, that's middle grade, right there. Right. Grappling with understanding and being cute. Like that's--wrap it all up, you know, toss in an adventure. And that's, that's what I love about writing for that age range, because there's that duality of child of still that childlike innocence, and the growing awareness of what's beyond them, right? And trying to reconcile the two.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 36:02**

Yeah.

**Antoinette Scully 36:02**

Do you, do you slip in any nuggets for adults knowing that there are adults reading these books more often than they used to?

**Kwame Mbalia 36:14**

Every book that I read, every middle-grade book that I write, throws absolute shade at adults and grownups, like, we don't hold back, right? Because they're weird. Grownups are weird. They're always doing ridiculous things, like taking their money, and then like, paying, you know, someone else. You know, there's all these bills, like, why they have so many bills? And, you know, just why don't they still drink from the hose outside? When did that stop? Right? Like grownups are weird. And so I think there's a lot of self-deprecating humor, right? Where we

continually ask, you know, the adults who in this case, a lot of times, they're the gatekeepers, right? Because the for in most cases, the middle-grade audience, they're not reading or they're not buying these books, right, someone is buying it for them, whether it's a librarian, whether it's a teacher, you know, for their classroom, or whether it's a parent, you know, for the kid at home. They're the gatekeeper for this book. And so there's a lot of self-deprecating humor. I'm poking fun at adults and grownups. And it's all you know, tongue in cheek and, and fun. But it's, it's the humor is humor that I think everyone can enjoy. And as an adult, you read it, and you're like, "Yeah, okay, yes, that's me. I, you know, I, I spent all day making a single pot of rice, because I kept getting distracted by emails, and burning the rice. So there's 12 pots with burnt rice in the sink. We ended up going to McDonald's, which my nine-year-old asked to do anyway. And I told her, 'Did you have McDonald's money?' And she said, 'No.' And so that was a whole thing. And you know, we should have just went to McDonald's in the first place." Right? And it's like, poking fun at adults is like 40% of my schtick. It's got to have--I don't care what book it's in--I don't care if it's an alien fantasy, right? And there are...you grow and split off from your parent, like a starfish, right, a polyp just popping off. We're gonna make fun of that older clone because they made some really suspect choices.

#### **Prince Joel Makonnen 38:28**

Yeah, I love middle-grade books and in that sense that it opened my eyes to realize that actually, those type of stories are actually the ones that the most people can relate to, you know because we're all, we're all really kind of, we still have that inner child in us. And we actually do want sometimes to goof off or go and drink water off the hose or, you know, pick your nose, like, you know, and have no like, inhibitions about it. And I feel like that's why it resonates with so many people. If you look at a lot of these big stories that I've traveled around the world, you know, thinking about, for instance, you know, The Lion King, or you know, even books like The Little Prince, The Alchemist, they're, they're kind of the stories that are very universal, because it kind of hits you in your prime kind of child that we all have. And they tend to tell stories that are very relatable. And so I think it's, it's actually a way of opening up, you know, Harry Potter, same thing too, like, adults love them. And I think that's the great asset is to a writer to be able to invite more people in. And even if it's in a kind of view of a child and a younger person. It's something that's accessible to everybody because everybody has been that age. And they're just much more fun because that's really what we do as adults. All we do is try provide for ourselves and our family. But then at the end of the day, we want to be, you know, at home and watch a movie, read a book, go out, we want entertainment, we want fun. And as a child, you have that and that's your world. That's all you have to worry about. Just have fun, go to class, make some friends, you know, play, play outside for recess. And I think as, as adults, we all miss that. That's why I think these stories tend to draw a lot of people, so it's a lot of fun to, to present a story that's really deep. But but but a kind of universal, easy-to-understand way.

#### **Kwame Mbalia 40:32**

And to your point, Joel, about stories that resonate. There's this like trend going around Tik Tok right now. Right, right, where everyone is recreating that one scene from The Sandlot where they jumped the fence to get the ball from the massive scary dog right. And then they, you know, they're running away trying to run back to hop over the fence. And it's all in slow motion and the

dog is chasing them like they're they're elements of these stories. Like, The Sandlot came out like 30 years ago. 30, 35.... You know, it's, it's 90s--90s, I want to say is when it is when it came out, and that that idea of you know, a bunch of kids, a new kid in town, all they want to do is they want to play a sport, all they want to do is they want to play a game, and there's always something that's preventing them and someone hits the ball over the fence. I don't care what society or culture you live in, there is an encounter where if a group of kids are playing and the, and the ball or whatever they're playing with, the Frisbee, the kite goes somewhere where they're not supposed to go and there's something scary there, right? Dog, wolf, bionic lioness, like, I don't care what.... The, that element, right, of trying to recover your toy so that you can continue playing, like, it's prevalent in a lot of different cultures. And just like like Joel was saying, that's what resonates about the middle-grade experience, we remember that. I remember, you know, losing a Frisbee over a fence and like, standing there for an hour trying to figure out how to get it back while, you know, not getting bitten. Right, like the ubiquitous experience is what resonates. And we find that so often, in the middle-grade genre.

### **Antoinette Scully 42:15**

What kind of advice would you have for authors that are coming up now, whether they want to do trade publishing, or independent publishing, which is a lot of the authors that I tend to work with are independent authors, they're self-published?

### **Kwame Mbalia 42:30**

I always give two pieces of advice. One is highly specific, is focused on, I guess, craft, and the other one is just more general. And so for the for the highly specific one, it's trying to end your writing session in the middle of a paragraph or in the middle of a sentence, right. Because for me, personally, one of the biggest obstacles to sitting down and write is that blank page and trying to figure out what I want to say, right. So if you end a writing session in the middle of a sentence, in the middle of the page, you can, as you sit down again, the next day or the next hour, whenever you're writing, again, quickly scan and immediately finish that sentence, half of the work is already done, you just have to continue the flow. But if you can eliminate, it's all about eliminating the obstacles to you writing. And that can be tiny. But when they add up, all of a sudden, your day is gone. You haven't written anything once. So as another example, one thing I've started doing is, you know, we're all virtual right now, my wife works, I work, and we have a calendar where you know, we just like say, "Hey, here's what I'm doing, I'll watch the baby, then here's what you're doing, you watch the baby," so on and so forth. I scheduled in a one-hour block for writing, as if it's an appointment, and I add myself to the calendar. So I know it's there, right, the phone goes away for that hour, I'm writing and it's just like another meeting that I have to attend. So that way we get to fit into the schedule instead of trying to, you know, pick up pieces of writing, in this highly specific, you know, pandemic that, that we're in right now. And then more generally, find your people. I was encouraged to submit my writing for publishing after I joined an online writing group. And someone read my work and said, "Hey, have you ever thought about trying to become a published author?" Because prior to that, which was only really like six years ago, prior to that I just wrote for myself, I just wrote because it was fun and how I knew how to express myself. But someone read it and was like, "Hey, why don't you, you know, try and submit this, you know, trying to get an agent try and get published?" I had

honestly never thought about that. So finding your people, finding your writer group, your gang, your squad, your coven, right, finding them, the encouragement that you give each other, the boost, the energy, the push, you will, you will attempt things that you might not have. Otherwise, it is so easy to talk yourself out of doing something, right. "They'll never like it. Oh, they don't want it. Oh, I'm the wrong fit." Having someone to encourage you, to hold you accountable in the way that only a friend can. It's invaluable. So find those people, and and then and watch how your motivation and your your creativity and your production takes off.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 45:05**

Yeah, I agree with all of that. I will say that a couple of tips from me are, so first of all, just for specifically people of color right now, I feel like we're really in a prime moment where there's an appetite for diverse stories. There's the financing to go with it, there's people willing to kind of back. I'm not saying it's all rosy, but it's definitely one of the better times where I feel like people are more receptive, and they're just making a point to try to find more diverse stories. Because, you know, obviously, our people, we've got together and we and we pointed out to them that, you know, they need more stories, even even in the film industry to the publishing industry. So go for it. And and that goes into my next point is write stories that you love, like, write stories that are close to you. Don't worry about, "Oh, well, maybe it's too far away." I'll just say, me personally, I have a culture that people might not understand. Or whatever your experiences, you might fail, there's only a few people that might relate to that, that's actually you don't know how many people are going to relate to it, then there's going to be and even just if you're gonna, you know, Kwame said this before, and he's like, even if you find just one or two people who grab your book and read it, and it will, like change their life or, or make them feel heard and seen, you've achieved something of a gift to humanity. And, and I bet that it's actually much more than one or two people, there's a lot of people out there that will gravitate to it. And so I know that we all here come from, you know, different backgrounds, and but we have a common culture and African diasporic kind of people. And I feel like we need more of those stories. There's plenty out there, but we need more. The moment is good, go for it. And just don't worry about whether it's mainstream or whether it's going to sell a lot. I think we just need a lot of different stories. And to my last point will be kind of what Kwame was saying also about writing the blank pages is terrifying and, and kind of, you know, even so, I'll say everything. I'll echo everything he said--blocking out time, you know, whatever, you know, drink, snack, routine you have before, do it. And I like to drink coffee. I said every time I can, I love coffee. I'm Ethiopian. We love our coffee, gets me energized. Oh, you too. Okay, good.

**Antoinette Scully 47:27**

I love coffee.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 47:28**

All right. And yeah, just I will say that what I've learned, and I know, Kwame said this too, is that writing is really about rewriting. You never going to write anything good worthy of, you know, showing it to people on your first draft, you have to get that out of your mind. And I also now have moved to LA to get into film. So I've learned the same thing and writing scripts and TV scripts and pilots, that I tend to kind of like, have my ideas. And I used to do this where I wanted

the ideas to be perfect in my head. And then I was "Okay, I'm now gonna write, and it's gonna be perfect. And it's gonna be like, amazing," you know? And the truth is, it won't, it won't. Just just accept that, just accept that defeat, that it's not going to be good. But at least like Kwame was saying, that having something on the page makes you feel like, "Okay, I'm not at the beginning. I'm already in it now." And revising, rewriting, you know, finding your people who will give you honest feedback is really helpful. And I found that it really helps me do that. And the one thing I do that I know some people say don't do is I actually like to, I'll say in terms of like my film, TV type work, I actually like to watch a TV show or a film that I really like or that I'm sort of trying to emulate. And I'll tell you, good quick preview that there's a show I'm trying to do that's similar to The Crown, but based in Ethiopia with Ethiopian monarchy. And so I watched The Crown. And I know people say don't do that like I've some cousin of mine, who's a sick artist, and she's like, I do never listen to like, she, I had told her about like Black is King from Beyonce. I told her it was like surprisingly amazing, and how well interweave the kind of African-American and African music came together. I was like, "You should listen to it," because she does a little bit of that kind of music that's, you know, a mix between raga and Ethiopian and kind of international Black music. And she's like, "No, I will never. I will not listen to it. I don't want to copy. I don't want to have like any, like, steal any ideas." And I was like, "Seriously, you think everybody's copying?" Whether they know it or not, you're not copying. But you know, you get inspiration. That's how art comes together. Nobody is coming with a completely unique story. So anyway, that's my long-winded way of saying that, kind of go for it. Whatever quirks you have in your routine, go for it. And just know that, make the rules work for you. You know, you don't have to follow anybody else's rule and once you do that, I think you'll unleash, you'll be surprised at how much you could come up with. I know that I have. So I hope people do that.

**Antoinette Scully 50:06**

I love it. I love it. I would love to one last time see your Black Boy Joy poster. And like, you know, when is that coming out? When is it happening?

**Kwame Mbalia 50:15**

Black Boy Joy comes out August 3. So this summer, not too, not too far now, just a few more months. And I'm excited about it. We talked about writing that balance of interrogating grief and interrogating joy to make sure that we have that balance. And this is, this is just my attempt to work on the opposite side of the coin to bring together all of these fantastic authors and creators and artists and have 17 different variations on how we navigate towards joy from whatever point, whether we're already happy or whether we're sad, whether we're grieving, whether we're angry. How do we get to joy, specifically centering, you know, Black boyhood? And it's August 3; I'm incredibly excited about it. And and hopefully, people will laugh and cry and have joy with the stories the way that I did when I first started reading. just

**Prince Joel Makonnen 51:16**

The cover is amazing. He, he just looks so joyful. And also our cover, which is Last Gate of the Emperor right here. I'm so excited for you guys to discover. So it comes out May 4. You'll be able to get your hands on this final print copy, which is is just amazing, I think. Yeah. And then there's if you go to the indie bookstore, you get one of those stickers I see. Yeah. So look

forward to this. It's a beautiful book, a beautiful cover, you'll want to, like, keep it on your shelf, and then read it and then pass it on to a friend because that's the right thing to do.

**Antoinette Scully 51:55**

Yes, Do y'all have favorite local bookstores? Joel, you're in LA, you said, I don't know exactly where you are, Kwame if you would mention.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 52:02**

I just moved here. So I moved here the day, like, we literally moved into this place on March 17. It was locked down. I haven't visited much of LA. Been ordering everything online doing like everybody. But I do know there's a couple of good ones around here. There's one in Inglewood, I think, I forget the name just right now.

**Antoinette Scully 52:25**

It's-- Are you talking about Eso Won Books Park?

**Prince Joel Makonnen 52:30**

Yes, yes. Yes.

**Antoinette Scully 52:31**

Go to them. They're awesome.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 52:33**

I definitely want to go check it out.

**Kwame Mbalia 52:35**

Yeah, I'm in North Carolina, in the Raleigh-Durham area. And there's a bunch near me. Quail Ridge Books. Page 158. Flyleaf Books. Read With Me. Regulator. Oh, my gosh, Kwame, what is the name? I'm going to... Oh, I have to, I have to do this. Because a Black-owned indie bookstore just opened in in Durham.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 53:05**

Well. I'll just quick shout out Politics and Prose...

**Kwame Mbalia 53:09**

Oh, they're great.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 53:10**

...in DC, because I'm originally from DC. So at least let me give a shout-out to my DC bookstore, so...

**Kwame Mbalia 53:17**

Did you say Mahogany?

**Prince Joel Makonnen 53:18**

I said Politics and Prose, and Busboys and Poets, but not, yes, thank you.

**Kwame Mbalia 53:24**

Mahogany. And then I feel like there's a missing... I'm missing one. Sankofa.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 53:30**

Sankofa, oh, my God. Yes. Okay.

**Kwame Mbalia 53:38**

Listen, we gotta, we got to make sure we support our own man. The one in Durham that just opened up this, you know, this month is I hope I'm pronouncing it, pronouncing it right. But it's Rofhiwa Books? The name me means "we have been given," just opened up here in Durham. And so yes, you know, we're quarantined, things are starting to open up a little bit more in North Carolina. So I'm hoping to get out there. They're books and cafe, and there's nothing that I love more than just sitting in a bookstore. That's where I write, with my coffee. It's the best, it's the best with either them or a library. So I hope to get out there to support them soon. In the meantime, like you said, this ordering through Bookshop and and trying to support the stores, you know, buying online gift cards from the stores to use, just, you know, supporting them in any way that I can.

**Antoinette Scully 54:33**

Oh, thank you so much. This has been such a great conversation. I'm so thankful that you guys were available to have a chat. Yeah, I love it. I love my job; my job's crazy.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 54:47**

That's so much fun.

**Kwame Mbalia 54:49**

Yeah, we appreciate you having us on. This has been, this has been a blast, any chance that we can get to talk about you know, Last Gate of the Emperor and Afrofuturism and just, you know, writing about the African diaspora in general. It's just, it's always fun, and it's always incredible.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 55:07**

Yeah, thank you so much for having us and for a great engaging conversation. I love everything we talked about. So thank you and look forward for you and everybody to discover Last Gate of the Emperor next week.

**Antoinette Scully 55:20**

Yeah. Have a great evening, everyone.

**Prince Joel Makonnen 55:23**

All right, you too. Take care.



**Kwame Mbalia 55:25**

Thank you.

**Antoinette Scully 55:26**

You're very welcome.

Thank you for listening to In Conversation with Black and Bookish. If you'd like to learn more about our guests, Kwame Mbalia has his own website. You can find him on Twitter @ksekoum and on Instagram @mbalia1. You can connect with Prince Joel Makonnen at his own website at princeyoel.com, on Twitter @hihprinceyoel, and on Instagram @princeyoel. You can find me, Antoinette Scully, on Facebook and Twitter @Blackandbookish and on Instagram @Blackandbookishblog. This episode was produced and hosted by Antoinette Scully. Our sound editor is John Scully, and our transcriptionist is Jessica Ladosca. Visit Blackandbookish.com to subscribe to future episodes and to learn how to support the show. Thanks for listening. Hope you enjoyed.

*Transcribed by Jessica Ladosca for Black & Bookish*