

Ruth Ibegbuna



&



Derek A. Bardowell

The Reader at Home is a series of online events, live readings and Shared Reading groups put together in order to bring books and people together for amazing experiences. The series began with an online, live discussion in November 2020 between two very good friends of The Reader, Ruth Ibegbuna and Derek Bardowell, who spoke about racism, sport and their hopes and fears for the future. What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.

Ruth Ibegbuna is the founder of award-winning youth leadership charity RECLAIM, the Roots Programme, a radical cultural exchange programme, and most recently of Rekindle, a supplementary school for young people aged 13-16 in South Manchester. She is also a lifelong and devoted fan of Liverpool Football Club. Derek A. Bardowell is a social sector leader, philanthropy advisor and the writer of *No Win Race: A Memoir of Belonging, Britishness and Sport*, published in 2019 by Mudlark. A *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times* Sports Book of the Year, it is a personal, painful exploration of what it means to be Black and British today.

Ruth: Welcome, Derek. Rather than a formal introduction from me, will you tell us what we need to know about you? Which parts of your work do you care about most?

Derek: I'm a writer. I started out as a journalist but very quickly moved into the social sector, largely because in working with a lot of young, talented people from marginalised backgrounds I saw there weren't many opportunities or standard career pathways for them, so I got into the social sector to try and open up some of those doors. Then, when I started delivering programmes,

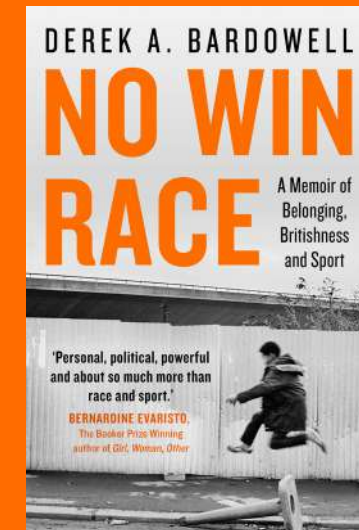
I noticed that, however successful these programmes might be, there just wasn't additional funding for continuing them, so I ended up moving into philanthropy to find out how money flowed – or how it didn't flow – into our communities. Most of my work now, when I'm not writing, is trying to redress that balance.

RI: Will you read to us from *No Win Race* to kick off the discussion?

DB: This is a passage from the introduction, bringing up some of the key themes of the book, and it refers to what got me into sport in the first place:

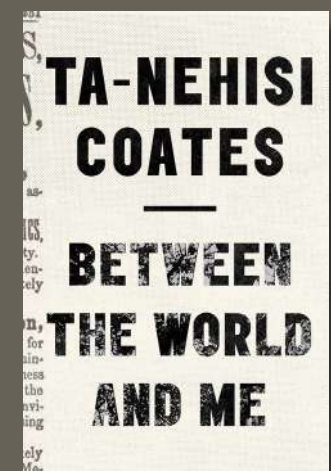
'It has always been difficult for me to separate 'race' and sport. Alongside music, sport has for many years been a platform where blacks have excelled. Where we've been allowed to excel. Whether you liked sport or not, black athletes were the most visible contributors to British society. Black people had of course built Britain, literally. We had constructed, supplemented and indeed strengthened the country. We had done so under forced labour, under poor conditions, with little or no rights, little or no credit. The black athlete's impact had been more difficult to conceal, their contributions measurable. Goals. Runs. Times. Wickets. Knockouts. Tries. This led to wins, which led to large audiences, which led to more money, which led to more media coverage, which led to more sponsorship, which led to a higher profile for the black athlete. They were symbolic. Symbolic of everything we had achieved in this country, for this country. In addition, they seemed to be the only black people in the public eye who were embraced by whites, even if they had to win adoration through a torrent of boos and unconditional allegiance to Jack or George.

Yet at the same time, so much of what happened to black athletes on the field of play reflected the issues faced by black people in British society.'



RI: I wanted to ask you: why this book, now? You've been a writer for a long time, what was it about 2018 that made you want to write this book about yourself, about sport and about Britain?

DB: I'd written this book, or a version of it, in 2009 and I first wanted to write it back in 2000. There has been so little significant change in terms of the dynamics of our society, this book could have been written at any time over the last 50 years. When I first went out to market with this book in 2010, it was rejected by a number of publishers. It wasn't a trendy issue at that point. But then Ta-Nehisi Coates's memoir *Between the World and Me* came out in 2015, Reni Eddo-Lodge's *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* was published in 2017, and I think these books opened up the market for more writing about race and the experiences of Black people in Britain. It shouldn't have taken these books to open up the market to reading about what is a perennial problem in our society, but that was what happened.



‘I cannot remember a time when I’d walked freely

RI: It’s interesting that you say it could have been written 10, 20 years ago, because one of the things that has struck me when I have read the book is some of your examples of sporting events from the 1980s, such as the Alan Minter vs Marvin Hagler middleweight boxing match at Wembley in 1980, which ended in riots – these examples seem shocking, but there are modern-day examples of exactly the same thing. Reading this made me think, have we moved forward at all?

One of the things I loved about the book was I felt you were writing about my family, my Black family in the north of England. When you write about Muhammad Ali’s 1980 fight with Larry Holmes, billed as ‘The Last Hurrah’, which your dad couldn’t bear to watch and said, ‘Turn the telly off’ – that’s exactly what happened in my family. When you were writing the book, did you have a sense that you were writing about a commonality or were you just writing about Derek’s family and Derek’s experience?

DB: The perspectives, experience and reactions I write about in the book were what I used to talk about with my friends and what I would read about in the *Voice* newspaper and *New Nation*. For me, these experiences were common. But the problem was they were not reflected in any national newspaper, so it felt like there was an untold story, an unknown side to all these national events. Hagler vs Minter was covered broadly by mainstream press because it was such a violent event, but if you looked at the coverage of, for example, the West Indian cricket team, it was so one-sided. British basketball wasn’t included in the mainstream sports coverage.

Breakthroughs in women’s sport would go unreported. I wanted to tell the other side of the story, to bring the conversations I was having with family and friends to a wider audience. I recently watched Steve McQueen’s *Small Axe* series of films, and *Mangrove* before that. Being able to see me, my experience, my community reflected on television is so moving and so important, and my book is trying to tell some of these untold stories too.

RI: I love seeing representations of Black people, especially Black men, being normal, being dads, dancing, having fun. Real lives being represented. Speaking of dads, I was thinking, there are so many stories in sport of heroic Black dads – Richard Williams, who trained both his daughters, Lewis Hamilton’s dad. I wanted to ask you about parenting – there’s a lot in your book about you and your dad, and about you and your son, and the role that sport and ‘race’ play in those relationships. Will you talk more about that?

DB: When I was growing up, the television in my house was on 24/7 and when my dad wasn’t watching the news, he was watching sport. Sport was the thing he and I did together, watching it, playing cricket in the back garden. I wasn’t sure whether sport would form the same bond between me and my own son, but then the 2018 World Cup happened, and he wept when England lost the semi-final. Sport matters to us both now. When I was young and I’d watch sport and *Match of the Day*, I wasn’t watching for the politics of it or to better understand Thatcherism in the 1980s, I was watching it innocently. But then I’d see Black players being booed, and that was distressing because that was

without thinking about what might happen next’

happening to me in the street. Everything that was happening in society at the time was reflected on the field of play, as it still is today. I love sport, I adore it, it has the ability to disarm you like few other things can, but at the same time it’s impossible for me to separate ‘race’ from sport. And as a parent now, I have to be careful how that shows when I enjoy sport with my son. In a way, it was easier for me when I was growing up – the racism was so blatant, it was there when I walked to school, or at the bus stop, in my everyday spaces. As horrible as that was, I knew exactly *what* it was and I developed tactics for coping with it. For instance, once after school I went

with a white boy, a friend of mine, into a sweet shop. When I came out, I was stopped, searched and questioned by two policemen, for no reason. They did not search my friend. From that experience, I learned that if I go into a shop, I have to buy something, or make sure I don’t bring something that I’ve purchased in a different shop. My son, now aged ten, hasn’t been exposed to such frequent and flagrant racism, but he will have experienced some more covert examples, be it teacher expectations or being followed by security in a store. I think that’s harder to identify and understand, for a child.

‘I used to approach *Match of the Day* with dread. It was the same feeling I had when I’d notice a policeman staring at me, the same feeling I had when walking down a side road and seeing a group of white boys, the same feeling I had when going into a shop with an item purchased in another store. Something bad is likely to happen. In such situations, my body tightened and my mind sharpened in preparation for the inevitable. I became a pre-emptive person from a young age. Had to know what was coming next. Prepare your response. I cannot remember a time when I’d walked freely without thinking about what might happen next. Tried to walk freely as a kid and ended up being accused of too many things. I had to tighten, to sharpen, to pre-empt. Problem was those scenarios had been so common, so frequent, I ended up in a perpetual state of numbness to avoid succumbing to anger, frustration, despair.’



RI: Here's a question from a member of the audience: 'Were you able to bring the experiences and perspective on race that you speak about so powerfully when you were working in the social sector?'

DB: I went from doing lots of work in the Black community to working in the funding sector, which is completely different, very little diversity at all. I was in a position of power and privilege as I was often the only Black person in the room. But it was a lonely position to be in, and you are always aware that if you mess up, you aren't just creating problems for yourself but for other Black people trying to follow you.

There are many people out there trying to do good work to combat racial injustice and inequality, but if the systems and structures don't move then their work is limited; nothing really changes. That's what we've seen with sport – there have been times when things have seemed to improve, but the people making the decisions and the structures haven't been fundamentally altered, so what's happened in reality

was a few people in power managing some bad press for a period of time by applying some short-term solutions. For instance, recently, players in the Premier League have knelt before kick-off to show solidarity with Black Lives Matter. While symbolic, a more meaningful concession would be for the Premier League to diversify its governance and senior leadership or to partner with Black-led charities, providing long-term and unrestricted funding towards Black causes.

RI: This year I've been heartened by the energy and organisation of young activists leading the Black Lives Matter protests, but the more experienced side of me is nervous for what's going to come next. I remember I was so excited when I watched Danny Boyle's opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics – multiracial, harmonious, loving. But my dad sent me a text saying, 'Be careful, they will bite back hard.' And he was right. He said the same about Obama's election in the US, and he was right. So, I wonder, will there be genuine change after the events this year?

'Windrush, the ship that is symbolic of post-war migration from the Caribbean to Britain, for that to be represented [in the 2012 opening ceremony] alongside those uncontested moments of obviously, clearly British history that no one would ever question as being British history, that was an amazing moment and arrival. And I and a lot of people wrote about it at the time. A lot of people thought that this was, if not the arrival of the Britain we wanted to live in, it was at least a vision of a possibility of reaching [this] in our lifetime. And we were wrong because four years later we woke up and realised...that millions of our fellow countrymen and women watched that Olympic ceremony red in the face with rage because it represents a vision of Britain that they hated.'

Historian David Olusoga, as quoted in *No Win Race*

DB: What's happened this year, not only with the Covid-19 pandemic but also with the murder of George Floyd in the US, has done more to expose institutional and structural racism than anything else in my lifetime. If things don't change now, I don't know what is needed to make that change. For the first time, the general public are acknowledging that systemic racism, and are signing petitions and donating money like never before. However, I worry that people in power will wait this out, give some concessions, and nothing will fundamentally change. But if that change doesn't happen, something is going to break.

I've never seen anything like this current moment, where the gaze on Black people has been so sharp, intense and traumatic. It wasn't like this when

Stephen Lawrence was killed, or when Obama was elected. But history shows us a pattern, where we have a high, like the 2012 Olympics, followed by the low-point, like the EU referendum, or from President Obama in 2008 to President Trump in 2016. If we're going to revert to that pattern again, I think something drastic will happen. This isn't just about Black folks now, there is a whole section of society that has been awakened. They might not know what to do with this awakening, but there are now more allies than I can remember seeing before. I'm an optimist when it comes to people power; I believe people can come together, agree on the issues that mean most to them, and shift the bar. But if that doesn't happen now, if the government does all it can to stop people aligning – because that's what



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'Few elite athletes carried the fight as much as Serena Williams. I stopped watching Serena play tennis after 2012. More than any other athlete she had been the one who had been the most excruciating to watch. The athlete whose every success filled me with joy, whose every failure made me upset. After a time, I couldn't watch.

Perhaps it was because Serena was doing Serena. Little or no facade. Didn't hide, mask, veil, lessen herself to the way I had to progress through my career. She did not try to present blackness in a way that would be palatable to us, to them. Didn't try to impress, to woo. Watching Serena had been like watching some sort of reality, no longer confined to the 'hood, but in the whitest of white environments. Tennis. This had been like blackness on prime-time television, in the House of Lords, in your office.'

it does – then the subsequent fall-out will be violent. I'm not advocating violence, but history tells us that's what we will see if the existing power structures are not adjusted to allow genuine change.

RI: Another audience question: 'Do you think there will be a backlash for the Black athletes, such as Lewis Hamilton, who have used their voices as activists since the death of George Floyd? We know racism is patient.'

DB: I need to say that I think what Black athletes are doing now to speak out against racism is amazing. Part of me thinks these big sports stars must feel incubated to some degree by their finances and sponsorship, but I also think those currently taking a stand as

activists are being smart in that they are taking control of telling their own story. For instance, Marcus Rashford is telling his own story, being strategic and careful about how his name is used, and that will in part protect him from the patience of racism. There will be a backlash, we've seen it with Marcus Rashford already. I think Black British athletes have learnt from their American counterparts and what they went through when they started becoming very wealthy and thought they were integrated, but then experienced a backlash which taught them otherwise.

RI: I have a deep love for Serena Williams, but she also causes me deep pain. When Serena Williams bleeds, I feel like I bleed. Can I read out the passage about her from your book?

DB: Serena has, rightfully, become a figure that everyone admires, but what she has had to go through to get to this position is incredible. But I still fear that position isn't secure. I know she is the greatest tennis player of all time, I feel that in my heart and soul, but I also think, unless she matches Margaret Court's record of 24 Grand Slams [Williams currently holds 23 titles] someone's going to rewrite this, someone's going to take that legacy from her. And Lewis Hamilton – he's equalled Michael Schumacher in terms of titles, but part of me thinks, he needs to get still more titles to really secure his place in history. No one thought anyone would approach or break these records, and Hamilton and Williams have done it, and have overcome so many barriers on the way, not just the colour of their skin but the economics

of their background. But still you can't help wondering, will this be enough? And that's so painful.

RI: Another question from the audience: 'Is there enough training going on in the world of sport to create lasting change?'

DB: No. I was reading a book about boxing in the 1920s from one of the great American sportswriters, and it was so biased. The writing is beautiful. It's used as a textbook on sports journalism courses in universities and colleges. But its understanding of Black people and the history of Black fighters is incorrect. It's a great book, but when I'm reading it, I know there's another side of this story that is not being told, and therefore it won't be told to the forthcoming generation of sports writers and commentators.



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So how to redress the balance? You have to tell those untold stories, those books have to be written. You have to have real change, not just concessions without any real impact.

RI: What's the important lesson you'd want us to take from racism in sport for our anti-racism work in other sectors and spaces?

DB: The activism of athletes like Marcus Rashford and Raheem Sterling is built on the backs of many others who have come before them and have worked hard to make the conditions in which they can speak and act. But what we've seen with Marcus is a distinct paradigm shift for the Black athlete in this country. It's not going to be the same in other sectors because they won't have a figure of the same standing as a Marcus Rashford,

but nonetheless, the same paradigm shift is required across all our public services, the social sector, etc. We don't want one-off diversity and inclusion workshops or a token Black person on a governing board. We need structural and systemic change and nothing less.

RI: I think about what Muhammad Ali meant to my mum: he told her she was beautiful, that he was beautiful. He was proud and articulate. My mum has a framed photo of Ali knocking down Sonny Liston on her bedroom wall – her bedroom wall! When he died, she hung a picture of him on her front gate with a sign saying 'Greatness died today.' More stories like that need to be told, until people understand what sport and intelligence and activism mean and what they can achieve when they merge together. It's been wonderful to talk to you, Derek. Thank you.

'I am America. I am the part you won't recognise. But get used to me – Black, confident, cocky; my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own. Get used to me.'

Muhammad Ali

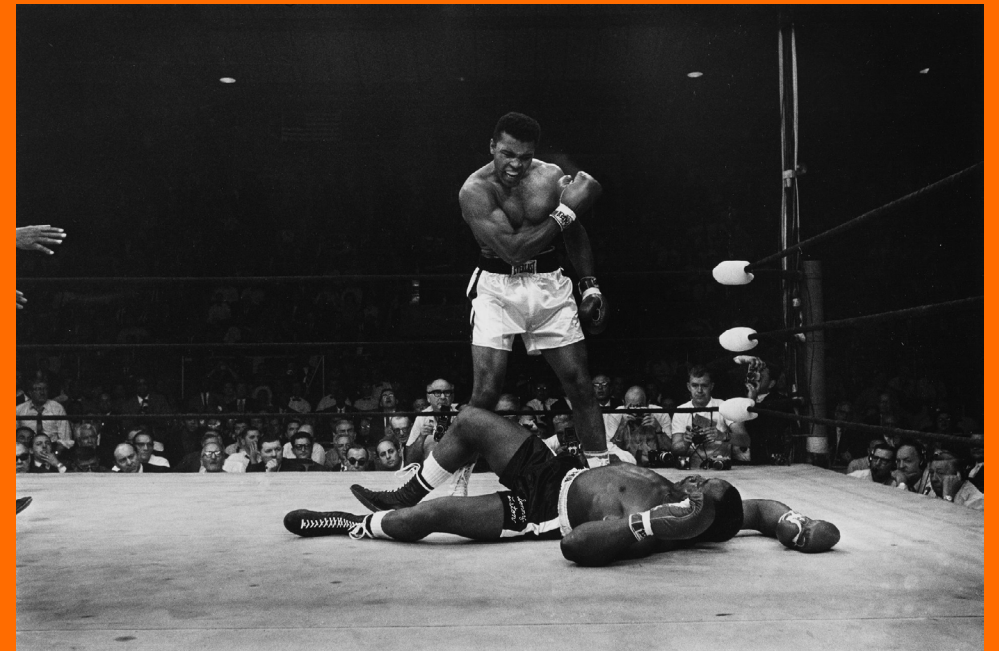
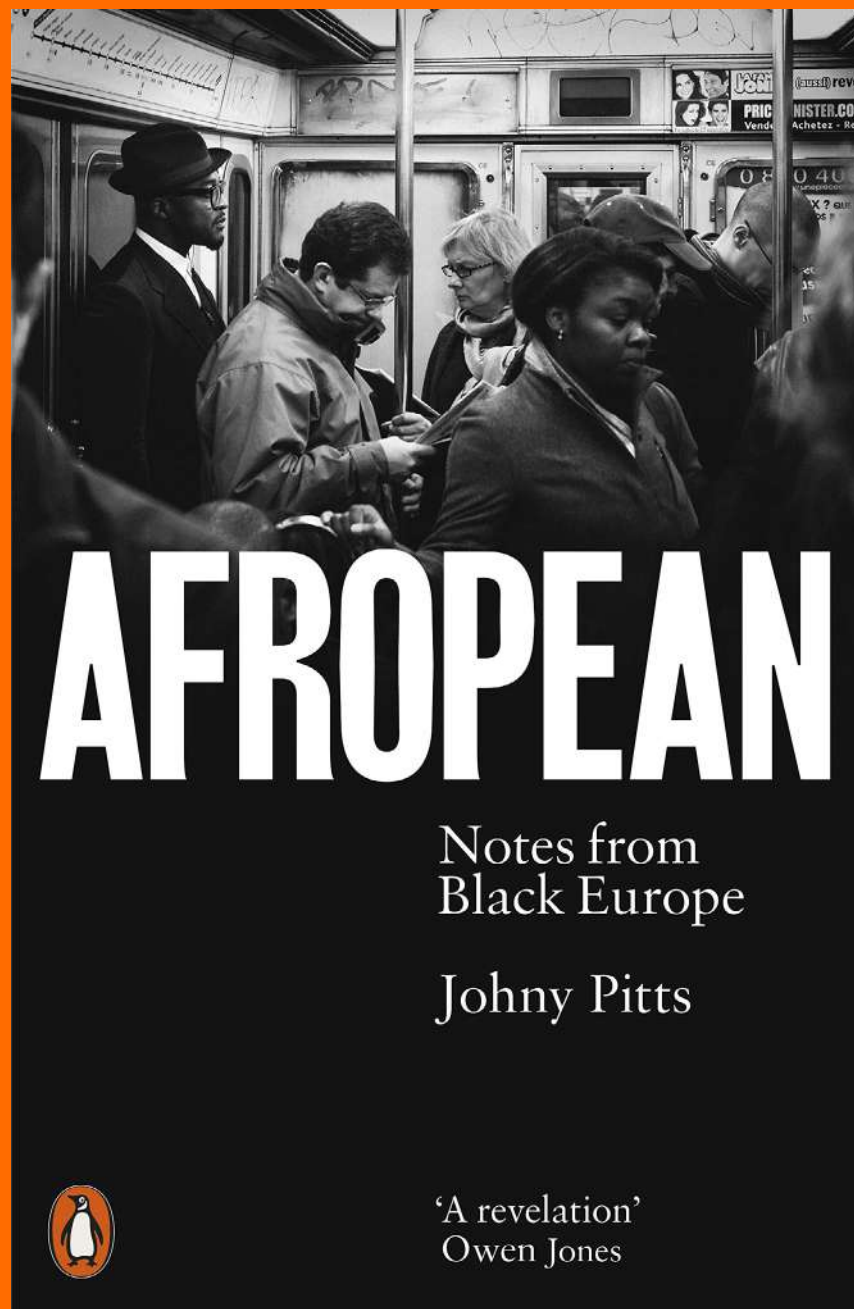


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We asked Ruth and Derek to recommend some further reading:

Derek: If you're looking for general interest books that explore or touch upon race and sport, I would recommend the following: John Edgar Wideman's *Hoop Roots* (he's my favourite writer), David Remnick's *King of the World* (arguably my favourite sports book), Howard Bryant's *The Heritage* (a contemporary classic), Simon Lister's *Fire in Babylon* (about the West Indian cricket team of the 1970s and 1980s), and C.L.R. James's *Beyond A Boundary* (simply one of the great books of the 20th century).

Ruth: *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* by Johny Pitts. I truly loved this book – such an interesting take on race, class, geography and identity in the UK, and its a timely read when Brexit has focused UK minds on European identity and what it means for that to be under threat. Johny Pitts takes us with him as he travels across Europe and seeks out Afro-European communities, often living out of sight and out of mind of policy-makers and the media spotlight, showing how the myriad intersections of historical injustice and present-day racism ensure that whole communities are kept on the periphery. Pitts travels from Sheffield to Brussels, from Berlin to Moscow, all the time ensuring the 'Afropeans' he meets on his journey are given the time, interest and respect that their lives deserve.

