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On Remembering the Voices of Grenfell: Diana Evans in Conversation About Writing as a Political Tool and *A House for Alice*

Carmijn Gerritsen – Radboud University, Nijmegen

Elisabeth Bekers – Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Diana Evans is a Black British writer of British-Nigerian descent. She is the critically acclaimed author of four novels and a recent collection of non-fiction pieces. Her latest novel, *A House for Alice* (2023), interweaves the personal with the socio-political and addresses issues of intergenerational belonging and collective remembrance in the wake of the Grenfell Tower tragedy of 14 June 2017 in West London. In this conversation, Evans shares her thoughts on the role of literature as a political tool for socio-cultural representation and discusses the genesis of *A House for Alice*. The interview took place on 13 May 2025 and was conducted, transcribed and edited by Carmijn Gerritsen (graduate of the Research MA in Literary Studies at Radboud University in Nijmegen and affiliated researcher at the [Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings](#) at Vrije Universiteit Brussel) with the help of Prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers (Professor of British and Postcolonial Literature at VUB and editor-in-chief of the [Black British Women Writers website](#)).

Keywords: contemporary Black British literature, Diana Evans, *A House for Alice*, Grenfell Tower fire, cultural remembrance

Introduction

Diana Evans is an acclaimed author of British and Nigerian descent. Born and raised in London, she spent part of her childhood in Lagos before taking up media studies at the University of Sussex and creative writing at the University of East Anglia. Over the course of her career, she has worked as a dancer, journalist, and poet, exploring the intricacies of music, literature and culture in diverse media outlets, before committing to the writing of realist fiction. A recognised novelist, she has received such prizes as the Betty Trask Award (2005), the Orange Award for New Writers (2006) and the South Bank Sky Arts Award (2018). Her debut novel *26a* (Chatto & Windus 2005) explores the experience of twinhood in the urban landscape of North West London. In her next novel, *The Wonder* (Chatto & Windus 2009), she immerses her readers in the world of dance by focusing on two generations of a family with Jamaican roots, tracing their lives from 1950s Kingston to contemporary London. Evans' third novel, *Ordinary People* (Chatto & Windus 2018), offers an intricate account of parenthood and various social relations and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction (2018) and the Rathbones Folio Prize (2018). Following a similar cast of characters, her latest novel *A House for Alice* (Chatto & Windus 2023) interweaves the personal with the socio-political in light of discussions regarding

intergenerational belonging and collective remembrance in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire in a multicultural corner of North Kensington, West London, on 14 June 2017. The tragic inferno, which claimed the lives of seventy-two inhabitants, was exacerbated by the flammable material on the exterior of the high-rise tower block and remains under investigation to this day. Shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction (2023), the realist novel examines the reverberations of this major incident and a smaller fictional domestic fire on the lives of various Black female characters, alongside their sense of displacement.

Most recently, Evans published her first collection of non-fiction, *I Want to Talk to You: And Other Conversations* (Chatto & Windus 2025), which brings together pieces from the author's career in journalistic and essayistic writing. She has previously held a position as Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and has taught diverse workshops, including a discussion seminar at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) on 28 April 2022, as part of the master course on Black British Women's literature taught by prof. dr. Elisabeth Bekers. Evans is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and served on the judging panel of the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2025.

This interview took place on 13 May 2025 on the occasion of the publication of *I Want to Talk to You* and in the context of the academic work by Carmijn Gerritsen, a graduate of the interdisciplinary Research MA in Literary Studies at Radboud University (RU) in Nijmegen who spent the first semester of 2024-25 at VUB's [Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings](#) (CLIC) under the supervision of Prof. dr. Bekers. During her research stay, Gerritsen explored the dynamic interweaving of cultural remembrance and the formally innovative or socio-political affordances of experimental Black British women's writing, in preparation of various talks and her master thesis (supervised by dr. Ruud van den Beuken, Assistant Professor of English Literature at Radboud University). Marking the eighth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower disaster, Gerritsen's thesis "Mnemonic Traces of Grenfell: Mediating Cultural Memories and Literary Experimentation in Contemporary Black British Writing" examines how writers deploy, recast and combine myriad experimental modes of representation across fiction, poetry and drama to mediate cultural memories of Grenfell through an affective lens. Focusing on how hypermediacy and formal innovation inflect processes of remembrance, it explores how a recurring repertoire of approaches, including self-reflexive, documentary, generically hybrid and multimodal means, are bound up with witnessing alongside discussions around activism and belonging. In this interview, which was conducted and edited by Gerritsen and Bekers, Evans discusses her own memorable mediation of the disastrous fire in *A House for Alice* and the role of realist fiction as an instrument for socio-cultural representation.

In the first part of the interview, Evans voices her perspective on contemporary literature as a political tool for bearing witness to difficult events and generating wider recognition for underacknowledged Black cultures. Discussing her own approach to literary experimentation and the construction of realist fiction, Evans comments on her "desire to record" personal and socio-political matters, while acknowledging the need to "almost bend [the truth], twist it, exaggerate it" in order to deliver that truth. She draws

attention to the complex interplay between formal innovation and thematic content that enables her to capture emotional experiences in, for example, her previous novel *Ordinary People*. Although 'the burden of representation' (Mercer 1990) is often placed on postcolonial writers, she explains how the depiction of Black British characters as "mainstream rather than peripheral or marginalised" functions as "an act of love and celebration." The novelist underwrites the affordances of realist fiction in considering the connections between experience, politics and cultural memory.

In the second part of the conversation, Evans elaborates on her novel *A House for Alice* and the 'narrative scaffolding' that enabled her to intertwine the personal with the socio-political while recounting the Grenfell Tower tragedy. Following diverse members of a British-Nigerian family in London, including the eponymous character and her three daughters, the work examines experiences of intergenerational belonging against the background of the wider remembrance of Grenfell, which looms over the tapestry of diverse narrative strands. In the interview, Evans discusses the feeling of personal responsibility which prompted her to document, and reflect on, the disaster and related struggles of displacement from a creative distance. She points out how, in contrast to the objective reflection that historical documentation offers, literary texts hold prominence as modes of representation that can "record painful histories with immediacy and emotion." Underlining the multi-faceted workings of her novel and its inspirations, she discusses the interdependency between her "fiction voice" and "journalism voice" in relation to the powerful role of poetry and narrative form (Evans 2025, 1-2). Evans concludes the interview by reflecting on the celebration of human life in *A House for Alice* and the importance of remembering the community most affected by the Grenfell tragedy.

Interview

Carmijn Gerritsen: Welcome, Diana. Before exploring the intricacies of your fourth and most recent novel *A House for Alice*, a wonderful work which explores the personal along the socio-political, we would like to start the interview by asking you about your specific approach to creative writing. In "The Art of Fiction" (1885), Henry James advises aspiring novelists to "[t]ry to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!". Observation seems to be central to your own creative method, for in your recent non-fiction book *I Want to Talk to You: And Other Conversations*, you describe yourself as "a scribe [...] on the balcony overlooking the spectacle" from the "shadowy outer room" (Evans 2025, 17). Could you elaborate on this image of yourself as an author who documents her observations of the world through the medium of fiction?

Diana Evans: The thing that always brings me to writing, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, is the desire to record. Rather than make stories up, which I do not enjoy, I prefer to use material that is already existing and use it in a way that changes it, in order to say something about the truth of what it is to live. I see myself as an observer and a recorder

of experience, whether that is a personal or wider political experience. It has always been the hard truth that brings me to the page to try and capture something of the truth. However, in order to deliver that truth, you do have to adjust the material. We have to almost bend it, twist it, exaggerate it. Oftentimes I bring in elements of the Gothic or the supernatural to get my sense of things across.

Carmijn Gerritsen: In relation to that, I would like to ask how you go about translating reality into fiction. What do you feel are the challenges and affordances of realist fiction?

Diana Evans: The main challenge is to make sure the work reads as if it is off the page and larger than life. In representing everyday experiences, there is always the risk of being too ordinary. As such, what I sometimes do is to create caricatures or amalgamations of existing people. It is very rare that I will take inspiration from real life and put it directly into a novel. When writing dialogue, for example, if you actually transcribe a real conversation, it can come across as very dull and pedestrian - why would anybody want to read it? Thus, you have to edit it to such an extent that you might edit the realism out of it in order to create a realist portrait. You have to take things out in order to make it seem real, which can be difficult at times. But it is also what makes fiction writing so enjoyable for me, because you are making real life more interesting and magnetic.

Elisabeth Bekers: Is that then also the role of the Gothic and supernatural elements that you include? Do they help you to enhance the realism of the text?

Diana Evans: When I use the Gothic or the supernatural, I am usually trying to encapsulate some kind of extremity of emotion in my characters, where both reality and experience tip over into something that feels as if it is existing in another dimension which has been created in that very moment. For example, in *Ordinary People*, Melissa is experiencing maternal psychosis and her experience of that is an opportunity to create this kind of supernatural edge in the writing. She would start seeing pictures falling off the wall. Her experience of the everyday reality at that point has become too unbearable for an everyday context. In turn, it becomes supernatural. In *A House for Alice*, there is a spectre of a little girl with "hair a flower of upward flames" who haunts the novel – a symbol of the damaged child that lives unresolved in the three sisters' psyches as a result of their troubled upbringing. Such symbols can be more subtle yet more powerful than explicit references, as they constitute a deeper layer of communication and interpretation between the reader and the text. For me, the supernatural and the Gothic cannot exist without realism or real life. I am neither interested in stories that are just fantasy nor narratives which are purely made up.

Elisabeth Bekers: Can we then say that it is not the supernatural or Gothic as such, but rather the political that drives the realism in your writing?

Diana Evans: The realism is political in the sense that I am trying to encapsulate the everyday lives of Black British people. That feels very central to what I am doing, to my larger project or 'master plan'. The realism is very politically motivated because I feel that there is this huge gap, an invisibility of Black characters in the narrative output in the UK. I am trying to close that gap. Part of the reason for revisiting the characters from *Ordinary People in A House for Alice* was the desire to achieve a sense of longevity and a greater depth to their life journeys, to cement them in our consciousness, to crystallise them in our memory.

Carmijn Gerritsen: All of your novels explore the experiences of individual racialised characters in contemporary Britain; they focus on how Black Britons experience life in multicultural London. To what extent do you believe the literary representation of Black British life might function as a meaningful form of resistance? Can literature help to promote recognition for Black cultures in today's British society?

Diana Evans: I firmly believe that literature is a really strong component in anti-racist work. My writing is definitely geared towards attempting to combat racism in a way that humanises Black characters. Part of the reason why Black people are not often rendered as part of British culture in mainstream series, films and literature is that they are often represented in a negative light, whether this is in relation to some kind of criminality or pathology around slavery, migration or racism. The theme of race almost strangles the humanity of Black characters. As such, what I am trying to do is to write from the inside. I aim to represent Black experiences in a way that reduces the emphasis on race and allows the characters to just be ordinary human beings. That to me makes my writing an important political tool.

Elisabeth Bekers: I think it is very important that you do that, so that both Black and white readers are presented with a broader range of experiences and perspectives. Do you ever experience the 'burden of representation' in raising awareness for topics that are not sufficiently addressed in contemporary politics and that have remained underexplored in cultural expression? I remember the Trinidadian-Canadian novelist Shani Mootoo telling us how she wished she could write about her dog instead of having to address postcolonial issues.

Diana Evans: I do not actually feel it as a burden. It really is an act of love and celebration as well, because I adore my characters. I think to centralise someone in a work of fiction is an expression of love. I am trying to show a deeper understanding of these characters, so it almost feels like a gift to my community. I do it with love in a way that does not centralise race. As such, I do not feel that I have to write about postcolonialism, multiculturalism, racism and migration. Although those things are an inherent part of what

I am writing about, I do not feel like I have to hit those themes on the head every time I am forming a sentence. I am simply writing from the inside of my characters and that feels like a very pleasurable and natural thing to do, posing my characters as mainstream rather than peripheral or marginalised.

Carmijn Gerritsen: That is a wonderful insight into your approach to creative writing. Up until recently, Black British literature was read primarily sociologically, for the insights it offered into Black British lives. In recent years, however, critics have called for more profound attention to the interplay between content and form in contemporary Black British writing (see Bekers and Cousins 2022). How do you yourself conceive of the interrelationship between literary experimentation and socio-political engagement in your writing?

Diana Evans: I am always interested in experimenting with forms and charting new territory, which is the reason why I draw on elements of the Gothic and the supernatural, to cross or transgress into other genres, and placing political intention or motivation at the heart of it. Toni Morrison does this with *Beloved* (1987), for example, and Octavia Butler with *Kindred* (1979), both novels in which the supernatural or science fiction are deployed to convey and dissect racial trauma. I am very interested in poetry as well and in fusing poetry into my writing – the lyrical expression of something, the attention to rhythm and pace and the suggested meanings between the lines, in the empty space that is never really empty. In addition, bringing in elements of music and movement allows me to make the text move in a way that is almost audible, and physical. I like there to be other presences in the text, beyond the words, which can be interpreted in whatever way as defined by who is reading it. I also read plays and watch films and TV drama to explore ways of broadening or shaping a novel, because I believe it is a form that, while harbouring a classic foundation that is important to me, should at the same time observe and reflect modernity.

Carmijn Gerritsen: There is little doubt about the politics of your most recent novel, *A House for Alice*, in which you explore the disaster that struck in the early hours of 14 June 2017, when a high-rise tower block in West London became engulfed in thick black flames, resulting in the loss of seventy-two lives. The heterodiegetic narrator depicts the Grenfell Tower fire as well as ongoing discussions around its remembrance and related socio-political issues in no uncertain terms, speaking of “a massacre of negligence, a criminal activity, a corporate atrocity, an obliteration of families” (Evans 2023, 11-13). Although socio-political issues are central to your earlier narratives, this particular novel might be viewed as a social document that does not only discuss the fire but is also marked, or perhaps ‘haunted,’ by the ghosts and memories of Grenfell. Can you tell us what prompted you to write about the Grenfell Tower disaster?

Diana Evans: As a Black British and London-based writer who actually used to live in the area where the fire happened, only a few streets away in a tower block very similar to that, I felt an immediate personal connection to what happened. I felt a sense of absolute dismay and outrage, together with millions of other Londoners. I felt a sense of great injustice, an injustice that was almost actively perpetrated against people who are vulnerable and marginalised. The Grenfell Tower was largely occupied by immigrants as well as the working-class, the elderly and veterans, many of whom have lived in the city for years and decades. In fact, there is an irony in that the tower was situated in an area where there is also a lot of wealth. It felt as if the borough council of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea were only valuing lives that were wealthy or privileged. When it came to parts of the population who were more vulnerable or marginalised, these lives were almost rendered disposable. The residents had been trying to get fire safety improvements done to the building for many years but they had been practically ignored by the council. As such, it was just a huge corporate injustice.

In turn, I felt that there was no way that I could not write about it, in the same way that I wanted to record the election of Barack Obama in *Ordinary People* because he was the first Black US president. Grenfell felt like one of those things that was almost too big to not write about. I felt a personal responsibility to do so. The main challenge in writing about it was trying to find a place to position it in the book that would not completely override the whole novel. I did not want to write a novel about Grenfell. I wanted to write a novel that was set against the backdrop of Grenfell. That is the reason why the fire features in the opening chapter to *A House for Alice* and the recurring ghosts then follow us throughout the book. It becomes the frame for the novel as we start and end there, in the same location, with Michael and Melissa's participation in the monthly silent walk that continues to commemorate and campaign for the disaster.

Carmijn Gerritsen: The dynamic relationship between the personal and the political that marks your earlier writing can also be observed in *A House for Alice*. This interplay between the micro and the macro level, for instance, features in the novel's parallel discussion of the Grenfell Tower fire alongside a smaller fictional blaze which strikes the novel's mixed-race family that very same night. Could you elaborate on your decision to connect these two separate events, a private and a public one?

Diana Evans: I do believe that the personal is always political. I was trying to make a clear statement about that in the novel, particularly in the case of the elderly character of Cornelius, who could be interpreted as a white, patriarchal figure at a moment of downfall, while the world around him, containing the destruction he has had a hand in creating and perpetuating, is also set ablaze. The parallel discussion of the two fires was a way of containing the private, domestic story within the public/political context of Grenfell. In a way, I was trying to simultaneously manage the macro and the micro while bending reality, because there may indeed have been many other smaller fires in the

world during that same night. Within the framework of realist fiction, it is sometimes the strangest things that lend themselves to fiction, and you can make small but significant adjustments to probability to make the narrative work in the way you want it to, with the right muscle and mood.

The process of framing *A House for Alice* in this way was very difficult because it was hard to get the tone right. The opening chapter about Cornelius begins in a very specific space and the biggest challenge was in trying to carry that tight narrative strand outwards towards a much more panoramic scope in the second half of the chapter. In that sense, referring back to your question about form and politics, I was very much experimenting with form here and this felt like a political journey.

Elisabeth Bekers: I think you pulled that off really well because those two strands are integrated into the novel very nicely.

Diana Evans: Thank you. I am glad, because I had to express a kind of palpable anger in that opening chapter. Rather than trusting my initial intuition to refrain from doing so, I had to disregard the rules that I have been taught in order to allow the rage to express itself openly. It is both a personal and public rage at the fact of the disaster, at the level of neglect that allowed it to happen. There was always the risk of the tone becoming too polemical, but I felt that in this case it was necessary.

Carmijn Gerritsen: This combination of different perspectives is a very striking element to the novel. The first chapter focuses on the character of Cornelius, to whose perspectives we only return in a single instance, after which the narrative follows the complex experiences of loss and displacement through the lens of the female characters in the British-Nigerian family as they are found to reconsider their position in Britain after the Grenfell Tower disaster.

Can you tell us how you go about writing about such a tragic event? How do you navigate the emotions involved in writing a story that features such painful memories, memories which might be difficult to put into words? Did you maintain a certain creative or authorial distance?

Diana Evans: I was able to express my distress and dismay about Grenfell through that polemical tone, which simultaneously allowed me to lay out the facts of what happened. My documentation of the disaster felt like some kind of retaliation or defence of the people who suffered as a result of the fire. At the same time, though, the narrator has to have an element of reserve and distance in order to create any type of fiction. I have always found that to be the case in my writing, because the material that I use is often of an extreme emotional content, whether that is dealing with grief, marital breakdown or maternal ambivalence. I am always dealing with hefty emotional material, and the way that I cope with it is by creating a distance in terms of the characters. I will try to

make them similar yet fundamentally different from myself. For example, the character of Melissa in *Ordinary People* is a fashion journalist who could never see herself writing a novel.

I am also aware that when you are writing a novel, you are existing in a time warp. You have to close the world of the novel around you and live almost in a cocoon. This endeavour is a difficult task, but one is that is very necessary to create the world of the novel convincingly. As such, there is a kind of internal distance that you are constructing as well, a distance between the writing self and the everyday self.

Carmijn Gerritsen: That the novel can be understood as a vehicle for our collective outrage over the Grenfell disaster can be seen in the efforts of the character of Melissa to engage with the memorialising of the victims and, as you write, to “witness the crime, to be with her city as it bent” (Evans 2023, 44). In turn, the final pages of the novel describe the monthly silent marches which are held to remember the fire in the surrounding neighbourhood: “They brought with them their green hearts and justice placards. They brought with them silence. When the time came, when the voice called, they moved out into the road and headed slowly for Grenfell Tower, the largest green hearts in front. [...] All of them remembering” (341-342). Could you elaborate on your decision to have the characters engage with activist discussions in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster?

Diana Evans: The characters come into direct contact with Grenfell, when Melissa goes to the site of the tower a few days after the fire, and when she and Michael meet at the silent walk that happens in the local area every month. These are real events that I attended myself, and that is what I mean about wanting to observe and document actual experiences, to describe more than invent, and while inventing, to do so around the solidity of fact. I was witnessing something that I could record and document on that silent walk and on the site of the burnt-out Grenfell Tower. I am literally describing something very directly, while interweaving it into the narrative of *A House for Alice*. That felt like the only way to write about Grenfell. I did not feel like I could write about it from the inside, in terms of writing about the particular lives of people who had lived or died in Grenfell. That felt too close. It would have been crossing a line of sensitivity. As such, I felt that the only way I could make Grenfell existent in the novel was to observe it in a very literal way and to openly express the anger and heartbreak of it.

Elisabeth Bekers: It is interesting that you say that, because I started reading *Cornelius* as a resident in the tower, before it became clear the novel was showing similar lives in different circumstances, with the tower looming in the background.

Diana Evans: At the same time, the people in the tower are in fact depicted, because a few real names of the victims are mentioned in the novel, including Zainab Chaicour,

Jessica Urbano Ramirez and Khadija Saye. It felt important to have them named and memorialised in that regard, while keeping a kind of respectful and sensitive distance from their inner lives.

Carmijn Gerritsen: This intimate reflection shows how these people are not just victims within a larger group or collective, but rather individuals with their own unique lives, relations and sense of humanity that should be acknowledged. I thought the mention of those who were lost in the Grenfell Tower fire was, indeed, a very striking and important part of the novel.

Diana Evans: One of the most heart-breaking instances of Grenfell was the death of Mary Mendy and her daughter Khadija Saye, a Gambian-British artist who was being celebrated at that year's Venice Biennale for her photography. She was very talented, at the ascent of her career, and she died with her mother that night in the tower. [Becomes emotional.] It upsets me when I talk about it. As you can tell, I really couldn't *not* write about Grenfell because of the sheer tragic and historic nature of it.

Elisabeth Bekers: Thank you for sharing your emotions with us. I think our reactions show how important writings about Grenfell such as yours are, because we cannot forget this disaster and its victims. The younger generation will perhaps only learn about this event through fiction, if it is forgotten on a political and public level.

Carmijn Gerritsen: The emotional and sensitive dimensions to ongoing discussions around this tragic event is a matter I am encountering in my own academic research as well. As I am unravelling diverse literary and experimental responses to the Grenfell Tower fire while engaging with them from a particularly distanced and scholarly perspective, I have found myself becoming deeply affected by the pictures, names or descriptions that I come across in representations of the disaster and the various creative works it has generated. They remind us of the violent realities of this event. Rather than an abstract concept or historical event, the emerging narrative around Grenfell becomes concrete once it is being documented, memorialised and mediated on the page.

Diana Evans: That is why writing about Grenfell is so important, because there is always a reserve and objectivity involved in historical documentation. Fiction can represent the specificity of individual human lives in order to record painful histories with immediacy and emotion. That is something straightforward documentation cannot do. That is why I love, and am inspired by, Tolstoy, because he documents intimate human life in the context of large political movements to do with war or political events.

Carmijn Gerritsen: I would like to turn to some thematic questions about *A House for Alice*. While a diversity of socio-political issues shape our understanding of the novel's

characters, the topic of intergenerational belonging seems to be central. Alice, the matriarch of the family who functions as an anchor for her children, seeks a new sense of home in Nigeria in the aftermath of Grenfell and her husband's sudden passing. In relation to this observation, I was struck by the epigraph's reference to Derek Walcott's "The Schooner Flight" (1979), which features the image of a window framing one's life. What does Walcott's poem mean for you, and how does its presence inform *A House for Alice*?

Diana Evans: I was inspired by various elements of that poem that really spoke to the overall question of diasporic belonging and the kind of feeling I was trying to capture in the novel. Often when I am reading poetry, I am struck by particular lines or moments of precise encapsulation – as if the poet has pinpointed something in my own mind, like a strange, often alarming literary telepathy. I will mark them down and later return to them when they seem to speak directly to the project that I am working on at the time. That is the context in which I read Walcott's poem. The character of Alice is in flight and the poem seemed to perfectly capture elements of her yearning and of her position of being in a country that was not her home. She is trying to create a feeling of home in a place where she does not feel she truly belongs. As such, she is looking at her life through a window pane. I believe Walcott's poem captures the sadness of that.

In a way, I see *A House for Alice* as a representation of Alice's voice. There are moments in the prose, almost undiscernible, when a shift occurs, into a particular voice that might be hers. The text will become slightly non-grammatical and broken, and the tone will change to a non-English, looser one, such as the scene in which Alice and Winifred are walking back from church, or when we are very deeply situated in Alice's mind, alone with her, and she is almost speaking directly to us. I wanted to give voice and visibility to an elderly Black-British character like Alice who has been in the UK for fifty years – someone who is very similar to my mother, someone who is often invisible and absent from the British narrative. It felt really important for her to be very visible. She is in fact visible and audible at the same time.

Carmijn Gerritsen: As you have previously indicated, *A House for Alice* is "preoccupied with the concept of home as a site of international conflict and loss" and "fantasy and dreaming" (Evans 2025, 160). This can be related, for instance, to the character of Alice, who experiences the results of displacement in the socio-political landscape of Britain and seeks the concept of home elsewhere. As the narrator comments: "Her essential wish, though, to return home, had been steadily refuelled by the British months. [...] There was a cold, greedy machine at the centre of the nation. She wanted to be in her country that knew her well" (Evans 2023: 311). Could you discuss this notion of belonging and the concept of home in more detail?

Diana Evans: At the heart of the novel is Alice's desire for home. This yearning for a sense of home also exists in the other characters, who likewise yearn for different places of belonging. Alice's wish therefore functions as a framework for a selection of cross-generational yearnings for places of physical, familial, romantic and spiritual belonging. All the characters in *A House for Alice* are in search of a place where they feel entirely settled and can live in full expression of themselves. That is the fundamental human desire for belonging. I think we all feel that, right? We all desire a place where we can be at peace and be ourselves.

I was attempting to explore that notion across different contexts beyond the concept of geographical place. The question of home is always present in my writing because I myself have always questioned my place in Britain. As I get older, I actually think I feel much more settled in my sense of geographical home, because I have come to adulthood and raised my children here. When I was younger it was very different, because I was frequently questioning my origins and sense of belonging in the UK. This notion has coloured other aspects of my experience in the framework of family, relationships, and parenthood. It will always remain a factor in my thinking.

Carmijn Gerritsen: Indeed, I believe that the concept of home does not have to be found in a specific place but rather within a wider community, for instance. It constitutes a multi-layered topic that can hold a tapestry of different meanings for a variety of people.

With regard to some of these notions, I would like to ask you about the potential inspirations for the novel. As the eighth anniversary of the Grenfell disaster is coming up, it has become clear that the event has generated a wide range of cultural responses, including Jay Bernard's multimodal poetry collection *Surge* (2019), the spoken-word radio drama "Grenfell III" (2019) by George the Poet, Steve McQueen's film *Grenfell* (2023), and Ben Okri's elegy, which was shared only a week after the fire. *A House for Alice* seems to be the first novel to dwell on the ramifications of the fire. How did you find the right narrative structure for the story? Were you in the writing of the novel inspired by any earlier works that have engaged with the remembrance of the fire, or with other tragedies?

Diana Evans: I was not particularly influenced by previous cultural responses to Grenfell. One of the main inspirations behind the structure of *A House for Alice* was Tolstoy's large-scale writing and the way he contains everyday lives within larger political moments. I was also reading a lot of press around Grenfell and that was really useful in my attempt to write about the disaster in a very factual and journalistic way that was reserved and distanced. In addition, I was constantly listening to "Bridge Over Troubled Water", a tribute song to Grenfell by British artists such as Stormzy and Paloma Faith, which was released only a few weeks after the fire. That song was on repeat and helped to keep me connected to the book, exemplifying how music is always something that I am trying to fuse into the narratives I am creating.

More generally, in relation to the topic of dramatic storytelling, Toni Morrison has always been a big influence in the background, because she was often writing about African-American history and historical moments in the context of very specific lives. She is an overarching influence in my work, and the statement she once made, that she writes for black people, is something I very much relate to. Although many other demographics might enjoy it, my writing is targeted towards black readers who I feel have been underfed and misrepresented. In fact, one of the most moving experiences I have had in my writing career is when a husband and wife came up to me after a reading to say that they had truly seen themselves in my novel *Ordinary People*. That is the most important thing for me. I think there is much more ground that I need to cover - it is never-ending work.

Carmijn Gerritsen: This reflection manifests itself really beautifully in *A House for Alice* because the realist novel discusses the cultural and collective remembrance of a tragic event which continues to mark socio-political discussions today. The narrative behind the Grenfell Tower fire should be remembered, commemorated and mediated. It should be granted a form of cultural longevity on the material page.

Diana Evans: There are ongoing debates about what to do with the actual tower and whether to demolish it and construct a monument for the victims. I believe that the building should remain until justice has been served. It is a real bone of contention at the moment, because there are people who would rather just not have it there to remind them. I feel that it would create a possibility for it to be forgotten and for justice to be postponed. The most important thing is that justice must be served.

Carmijn Gerritsen: In relation to your discussion of the complexities of the tragic fire, in the introduction to *I Want to Talk to You*, you distinguish between the affordances of your 'fiction voice' and 'journalism voice' in the writing of your fiction and non-fiction. Whereas the former is "nebulous" and "shadowy", the latter is "direct, conspicuous and definite" in relation to the discussion of subjects which "already had a shape and texture of their own" (Evans 2025, 1-2). When reading *A House for Alice*, both voices appear to be influencing each other. This is illustrated at the beginning of the novel, as realist depictions of the fictional characters are interrelated with images of the Grenfell Tower fire. Could you elaborate on this potential interplay between your journalism voice and your fiction voice?

Diana Evans: That is a very interesting yet difficult question because both voices are very related. They are both distinct and highly interconnected. The writing of fiction is my main vocation, but there is something that I am able to express through journalism that I cannot do in fiction. It is the directness of address that feels crucial for me to use in my work,

because it feeds the fictional voice; it keeps the fictional voice alive. Thus, they have to be kept very distinct from each other, but they are interdependent as well.

Carmijn Gerritsen: You have previously indicated that you have an affinity with the writing of poetry. As the poetic form is often used for the purpose of commemorative writing, and various poems on the topic of Grenfell have already been published, could you comment on the role that your poetic voice may have played in finding a way to remember the fire and its victims?

Diana Evans: The poetic voice is part of the texture of my fictional voice, as I am always trying to write, or naturally tend to do so, in a rhythmic and musical manner, very much preoccupied with language, pace, pattern. And I think that, in a way, poetry is similar to journalism through its tendency towards the direct address. It is a form of direct expression in relation to the articulation of emotion in a particular moment. There is less dependence on a larger structure, which is something which I am always grappling with in writing fiction. The most difficult thing about fiction is the need to find a new engine, the right vehicle, with which to express what you want to say, a concern that is less dominant in the engagement with poetry and journalism. That is why the journalistic voice is an important tool to exercise that muscle.

I actually do not write poetry much anymore, in contrast to the start of my career. In fact, I started as a writer of poetry before deciding on the medium of fiction. I found that the poetic form became too small for me. I wanted to work on a larger canvas.

Carmijn Gerritsen: As a way to wrap up this conversation, I would like to ask you what feelings or observations you hope *A House for Alice* will elicit from your readers?

Diana Evans: The most obvious one is for readers to be reminded of the facts behind Grenfell as well as the human element behind the suffering and heartache. At the same time, though, I do see the novel also as a humorous book. That is probably not obvious to many people, but humour is really important to my writing. I had a lot of fun *writing A House for Alice* and I want the reader to feel the sense of comedy and life that is captured within its pages, alongside the sadness – there is light and there is shade. Overall, I would like the reader to be reminded of the tragedy of Grenfell, while being brought to witness the expanse of human life that has been celebrated within the same book.

Carmijn Gerritsen: That is an evocative and hopeful note to end on regarding the capturing of the multiplicity of human experience. Thank you so much for this lovely conversation and your insightful reflections. It has been truly exciting to listen to you talk about your novel in such a detailed fashion!

Diana Evans: Thank you for some really interesting questions Carmijn and good luck with your thesis!

Elisabeth Bekers: Thank you, Diana, for getting in touch with us! Remember that you are always welcome to come and join us for another conversation if you are travelling to the continent and good luck with the new book that you are writing.

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