

LIFE ON A PLATE

SEASON 2, EPISODE 1: CANDICE CARTY-WILLIAMS

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Queenie, people, food, eat, book, life, write, cook, read, incredible, Waitrose, remember, fishbone, cooking, cashews, mum, grandad, author, called, family

SPEAKERS

Candice Carty-Williams, Jimi Famurewa, Alison Oakervee

Jimi 00:00

This season of Life on a Plate is sponsored by Bart Ingredients whose extensive range of quality herbs, spices, seasonings and pace are all available at Waitrose. Bart offers so many simple, delicious ways to elevate your cooking, from aromatic whole spices, to handy blends and pace, such as ras el hanout, or black garlic paste. They'll help you build incredible depth of flavour and create beautiful dishes. What's more, with over 50 years of experience working with producers all over the globe, Bart guarantees their ingredients are grown and harvested responsibly, with care for people and the planet. So, whether you're just starting out on your cooking journey, or you're – forgive the pun, a seasoned chef, you can relax and trust Bart to open up a world of exciting flavours. Go to waitrose.com/bart to discover the range.

Hello, and welcome to the second season of Life on a Plate, the podcast from Waitrose. In each episode, we talked to some very special guests about what food means to them, asking about their comfort foods and favourite dishes, their food memories and go to ingredients – and finding out a lot more about them in the process.

Jimi

Alison, how are you?

Alison 01:25

I'm really good, thank you. How are you? It's been a while.

Jimi 01:28

It has been a while. It's really good to see you. This is great. It's good to be back isn't it? I'm very excited.

Alison 01:34

Yeah, it's like we know what we're doing this time. It's kind of...

Jimi 01:38

[laughter] Don't say that! I wanted to ask you about something actually that I saw you put on Instagram which really made me laugh – which was you trying to tell your parents about the podcast and their reaction to it. I feel like you've got to share this.

Alison 01:54

Ah, I mean, like all mums and dads they were really excited. They couldn't wait, they downloaded the trailer so they were ready and on the first morning they did ring up in a panic because I'd also told them about our photoshoot and how much fun it was, and just how much we both enjoyed it. And so I think they also thought that our podcasts were being filmed as well. So, they were like: 'We can only get the sound to work, we can't get the video to work'.

Jimi 02:21

I love that. I just love the idea of them struggling to get the video to match the sound.

Alison 02:28

My 15-year-old nephew rings me up after each episode and gives me his feedback.

Jimi 02:33

Oh, brilliant! We've sort of got every demographic covered. Which I absolutely love.

Alison 02:41

Mind you, you've got me into trouble.

Jimi 02:44

Did I?

Alison 02:46

Yeah, mentioning that I'd posted lemon drizzles in the post because I've had a series of people saying: 'Where's mine?'. So yeah!

Jimi 02:50

We should have seen this coming really, shouldn't we? Yeah. Oh, man. Well, I was going to ask what you've been doing but you've basically just been making lemon drizzle cakes non-stop!

Alison 03:00

Yeah. What have you been up to?

Jimi 03:01

What have I been up to? What I've been doing, actually, I've bought a load of cookbooks and I've been kind of... just sort of... re-engaging and sort of, like, working through things and it's kind of really making me miss restaurants, miss travel, but it's a really great way to sort of bring places back to life. I bought one fantastic vegetarian-focused one by a place called Superiority Burger. It was a very cool New York, all-veggie, mostly vegan restaurant, but it's really, really, really great. And it was kind of... it

was that weird thing of looking through the book and it's got great pictures of New York and stuff in it. And that was making me...

Alison 03:43

It's whetted the appetite?

Jimi 03:45

Oh completely. Yeah, I'm sort of, I'm very ready to go.

Alison 03:47

So, what do you do, make yourself cook a new recipe every week, or two times a week?

Jimi 03:52

I wish, I wish I could be that kind of committed and strict with it. I don't know about you, but it's very, you know... I'll spot something on Instagram or someone will mention something and it'll just worm away there for weeks and weeks. And I'll kind of visualise this dish and I kind of have to, kind of, bring it into being.

Alison 04:12

Somebody posted a picture of salt & pepper crispy squid with a chilli sauce. And that's what's lingering away at the moment - and you can't get that from a takeaway.

Jimi 04:23

Right! We've got an amazing guest coming up. It is the incredibly talented Candice Carty-Williams, who is of course a young British author who has taken the book world by storm. Her debut novel, *Queenie*, was not only the subject of a massive bidding war between four publishers, before it was even released, it then became a bestseller, and last year was named Book of the Year at *The Bookseller's* National Book Awards. It's hugely significant that, because Candice was the first black author to win that prize. And it's richly deserved, completely. *Queenie* is to my mind, sharp, clever, funny, outrageous and gives you such an amazing insight into a way of life, culture, and a part of the world. It tells a story of a young black woman negotiating her life in London amid the push and pull of family and friends and work and relationships. I absolutely gulped it down. I found it pretty unputdownable. And I'm really looking forward to speaking to her. How are you feeling about this one?

Alison 05:37

I'm really looking forward to speaking to her because she just writes about the area of South London that I live in.

Jimi 05:43

Hmm, gotcha.

Alison 05:44

I find just the afro Caribbean food in Brixton fascinating, and I'd just love to hear a bit more about her memories of home cooking and what her grandmother cooked.

Jimi 05:56

Yeah, no, I think I didn't put it together, but yeah, obviously, she's... she's talking about your manor to a degree. But yeah, it's a part of London, and the world that I know really well and she kind of brings it so vividly to life. But yeah, I can't wait, she's absolutely brilliant. And a real force for change as well.

Alison 06:20

She certainly is.

Jimi 06:24

So, all right, here is our conversation with Candice Carty-Williams...

Jimi 06:28

Hey, good to see you Candice.

Candice Carty-Williams 06:31

Hi, good to see you, too.

Alison 06:32

Hi, nice to see you.

Jimi 06:35

We wanted to talk first of all, because we zero in on all things food, we saw that in the wake of your historic win at the British Book Awards, Book of the Year – you can tell it's a great subject already - but a huge deal, amazingly well deserved, we read that you kind of, in the wake of that moment, you put your phone on aeroplane mode, made yourself salmon and broccoli, and just kind of tuned things out for a moment. Is food one of the things that you use to kind of quiet down the world when things get too loud? And how you kind of comfort yourself in those times of intense scrutiny?

Candice Carty-Williams 07:17

That's such a good question. For me, food is like a weird thing. It's like fuel, but also like when I do that... So, I'm really bad at eating properly. And so, when I know like I'm going to eat something, I'm like okay, it's going to be like a good thing, it's going to be like a really delicious thing to you, which might not be delicious to other people, which I'm sure we'll get into. But it's always like it kind of punctuates a moment. And so, for me, it was like you're going to... like the announcements going come out, and then you're going to cook and you're going to eat and that's how you're going to end it. And then I had, I think a turmeric tea. Just to sort of like round off the day, I guess. Yeah.

Jimi 07:54

Yeah. Reading *Queenie*, although it's not explicitly about food in any way, like food really shone through for me as a constant throughout it and something that I could really relate to in terms of, you know, the grandparents and, you know, just being prepared – snacks when you didn't even ask for them and then insisting you don't want them but still eating the plantain that's put in front of you.

Candice Carty-Williams 08:20

Oh my gosh.

Jimi 08:21

Yeah! So, what are your early memories of food and its place within your family and your kind of situation that take us back to them?

Candice Carty-Williams 08:26

So, I've got one memory that I have for myself, like my first food memory for myself was cheese on toast, because it was something that my mum would make me in the evenings. I remember reading this amazing kids' book, that I'm always trying to remember the name of, so if anyone remembers it, please holler at me. But it's basically this family and no one can decide what they want for takeaway that Friday. And so, their mum is like: 'Okay, well, we can just get everything'. And so, they go to all of these different food shops. And I remember reading that as a kid and being like: 'Oh my God, like all of this is amazing', so it was like Indian, Chinese, fish and chips. And I was like, 'Oh my God, wow!'. And my mum was like: 'Okay, *you* can have cheese on toast'. And I was like: 'Oh, okay, thanks mum. So, I would like read every page and I'd look at all these illustrations, all this exciting food, and then I would have like one bite of cheese on toast and I'd be like, it's basically the same thing. And so that's a memory that I had. And so that was my thing. So that was me and my mum. So, I lived with my mum for a bit and then we moved in with my grandparents. And that was very much 'food is not fuel, food is love' with my grandparents. Especially my nan. So, my nan is like: 'If you aren't eating, then something is wrong'. And it's a bit like: 'No, I'm just not hungry'. And so... but with my grandparents, I remember my nan telling me - and this is the food memory that was given to me - I was really young, and I just started eating solids and they gave me some white fish and potato, and I made a funny face, and then I reached down into my throat and I pulled out this fishbone. Oh, and then just like carried on going. And they were like terrified, and they were like: 'My God, we could have killed her!' And at that point they were like: 'We knew you were very determined to get things done by yourself'. And I will say: 'Yeah, that sounds like me'.

Jimi 10:25

Yeah, to become like a metaphor for your entire existence!

Jimi and Candice in unison 10:29

"Just get on with it."

Candice Carty-Williams 10:29

You just reach down your throat...

Alison 10:32

Pull out a fishbone and carry on.

Candice Carty-Williams 10:34

Exactly. But in terms of growing up around food - the pot was always on and I learned to cook. I'm not sure where I learned it from because I never used to watch them cooking, because it was never like:

'Come and help me', it was always that, again, food being love and comfort, was like: 'It's going to be ready for you, so you just need to go and do what you're doing and I'll call you', and I'd always be like: 'Do you want help? Or do you want...?', And it would just be like: 'Why would I? I don't understand what you'd... like, because it means that I'm not loving you in that way if I'm not doing everything for you'. Which actually I'm quite averse to because I'm a bit like: 'I like to do this stuff'. So yeah, lots of food memories but mainly being told to like, just go and like do something - mainly chores like go and do chores and then you can eat afterwards. Maybe just like so I could lose some weight, probably.

Alison 11:23

But did you say you like cooking now?

Candice Carty-Williams 11:25

So, I love cooking now. I really do. I live by myself. So cooking is a thing - that I don't cook very often. And so, like the other day, my friend, he was talking about curry chicken and I was like: 'I can make that really well'. And he was like: 'Seriously?', and I was like: 'Yeah, I can. I can do that'. And I don't know where I learned that... I don't know where I learned it from. I think it's just an intuitive thing, I'm quite an intuitive cook. But I've always got my like Jamaican seasonings and my curry powder. And like you make your dumplings and you cut up your carrots and potatoes. And so, I made a huge batch of it and I put it in the freezer and I was like: 'I'll bring it to you because I love doing that'. But otherwise, I wouldn't do that because I live by myself.

Jimi 12:03

Yeah, completely.

Alison 12:04

You've got some Indian heritage, is that right?

Candice Carty-Williams 12:06

Yeah.

Alison 12:07

Have you explored it more in these times of DNA searches?

Candice Carty-Williams 12:10

I have. So, my grandad is Indian. And that kind of has... it doesn't reflect in his cooking or the way that he is. But he has never spoken about his background really. I think it's something that he just doesn't want to do. I think that it is just something that he's just not willing to talk about because he grew up in Jamaica, but I do understand from stuff I've heard from other people, that his mum was from a higher cast than his dad. And so when his parents were together - and it says a lot about my grandad and his ways - but his mum's family were like: 'You can't be together', so they ran away to Jamaica. So that's why my grandad was born and raised with his brothers in Jamaica.

Alison and Jimi in unison 12:53

Wow!

Candice Carty-Williams 12:54

Yes, really intense. If you ever met my grandad, it would explain a lot about that man! And so yeah, I did some ancestry testing, because I was really interested in that. And, you know, lots of things that I knew were there. But, you know, from my dad's side, it was like, 36%, Nigerian, my dad, again, is Jamaican.

Jimi 13:20

So, hang on I've got to stop there. You're basically Nigerian. We can claim you. It's fine.

Candice Carty-Williams 13:22

Can you imagine? What I'm not going to do is go on Twitter and be like: 'Hey, guys, so I'm like 36% Nigerian' – they'd be like: 'Shut up'. And so, I kind of guessed those things. So, my nana said, like: 'I think we're from Sierra Leone somewhere'. So, Sierra Leone was in there. And I was like, 'Okay, so everyone kind of knows a bit'. And it said that I was 13% South Asian and I was like: 'Okay', and then it said, I was 13% Italian. So, I was like, 'Hi, grandad, so I've just done this thing, and this is the thing that it says, and he was like: 'Okay, and so is there any Italian?'. I said: 'I don't know.' And he said: 'You don't know?' And I was like: 'Well, can we talk about it?', and he was like: 'No, there's nothing to talk about'. And I was like: 'Okay, okay. Okay, cool'. So again, a very private man. And so that was really interesting. So, it was like, he's obviously... he's got so much like, Italian and Indian in him.

Jimi 14:15

It is really interesting to say that because obviously in *Queenie* and I hope we get a chance to talk about your next novel as well, it seems like families and family secrets and kind of the slightly diffuse nature of, of the family units and different ways of being raised. That's a real preoccupation of yours and you can see that yeah, yeah, it kind of comes you know, it comes from that situation, in the sort of, your mysterious Italian roots.

Candice Carty-Williams 14:45

Yeah, I know, so basically Italian, Indian and Nigerian. Oh my God. Yeah, never going to say that out loud. But also thinking about it... so my dad, who doesn't feature much in anything that I say, I have some really interesting food memories of... so my dad is an incredible cook. So, if you don't know this, Jamaican men are the best cooks... like it's, I don't know why, I don't know how, but we all know it. And so, if you step into like any Jamaican restaurant, there'll be a man in the back who is in charge of everything. And there's one Caribbean takeaway that I go to called Cool Breeze and the chef - he is a vegan; he doesn't eat meat - but he makes the most incredible curry goat. He makes the most incredible brassy chicken just because it's instinctive. He doesn't taste it. He just does it. And it's done. And it's incredible. But my dad who worked for London Underground for 30 odd years, I would go and visit him at his offices which were in offices, I say offices like the little station in Morden, or Kennington. And it was just like, sort of like space that they would be in. And there wasn't much to do because he was basically on call for most of it because he fixed signals. That was his job. And so he would cook all the time, he would just cook and I remember going there one day and just that being that: 'Hi, I'm just sort of here, just seeing how you are'. And he was frying plantain. So, all of my memories of him in that office or him doing work are just like frying plantain and waiting to be called to work. And so, I have all of these... but when I go to stay with him, and he'd cook, it was like the best food I'd ever had. Like,

he'd make like, pork, and he'd make like, incredible chicken, like, amazing rice and he's just an amazing cook. And I would always ask, like: 'Who taught you?', and he just be like: 'Mmmhn' - a man, a few words!

Alison 16:45

You mentioned you live alone now. But one of the big threads of *Queenie* are some disastrous flat shares. Take us back to your flat share days. And have you any memories of people cooking? And more importantly, have you got any horror stories of them?

Candice Carty-Williams 16:58

You know what at university, I lived with seven other people. And that was a shock to the system. And I look back now and I'm like: 'How did you?, because you can't live with one other person now. So how did you do seven other people?'. But I guess you were 18 to 21. So... did I not care as much?

Jimi 17:15

It was what everyone did.

Candice Carty-Williams 17:18

You had no choice. And so it was like them, and sometimes their boyfriends would come and live with us, or sometimes we were living with 10 or 11 people, and I just remember never being able to get into the kitchen. And so I would do lots of, again... so that is where I think I'd come from having all of this food cooked for me and, that again, my mum would always make ackee salt fish; so ackee is actually a Jamaican fruit and you have it with salt fish, which is salted cod, you season it all up, and you have it with that and rice or dumplings. And so I'd come from having all of these like amazing foods at home that we were just sitting around, which you know, you just take it for granted that your mum is always cooking for you. And then being like: 'Okay, so now I have to cook', and then be like: 'Okay, I guess I know how but then just doing lots of like: 'What is the quickest thing that I can have?'. And that is where I would just literally be like, I think that at university I just had sandwiches, because I was like, that is the easiest thing, and also eating out a lot because you just did, because also you had like a student loan. So you had money. And you could go and like eat and be like: 'Oh yeah, I'm in a restaurant, cos weirdly I've got like three grand in the bank'.

Jimi 18:20

I feel like it is an unwritten story of university life - certainly like the modern version of it, where you would get dumped this money and you would kind of be sort of play acting as a grown up almost, like going to Italian restaurants and eating out quite a lot. Yeah.

Candice Carty-Williams 18:36

Yeah, very much so. And so that was a lot of sandwiches. Because again, I think I just have this thing where if I'm not sitting down to eat a meal, I think it's come from family. I think it's like, you know, there are so many rules, it was like: 'You sit with your meal, because like we're having a meal now and you don't have your drink. I remember in childhood not being allowed to have my drink until I'd finished my food. Because it was like you will just fill yourself up with this drink. Honestly, if I said: 'I'm so thirsty...', 'But I don't care if you're thirsty, I don't care if you're thirsty. You'll be less thirsty when you finished your

foods and you've had your drink'. So, it was very much like that. So, then I think in terms of just like living my life, I think it just became like, unless I was doing eating in that context, so like sitting down properly with the person in front of them, food just becomes like something that you should eat to keep going. And so even now, I eat like one big meal a day. And then the rest of it, I just maybe might graze or like, I might have a smoothie and then my friends... My poor friends... Every day I've got like four people being like: 'Have you eaten, yeah?'. And I'd be like: 'No, no, no, no, I'm going to, I'm going to', and then later on they'll be like: 'So what have you eaten?'. So, I'll be like: 'Okay, okay, okay'. Because I'll forget when I'm writing. I definitely forget when I'm writing. So again, yeah, sorry, so the flat share thing was like, just grab what you can. So, like any anytime I've lived with people it was just like, it's not going to be a thing, it's just going to be like: What is the quickest thing to get you in and out of that kitchen?'

Alison 20:04

Because that's what I was going to ask you, I was going to pick up on what you said about grazing while you're writing and concentrating, you know, what are you snacking on, what you're grazing on?

Candice Carty-Williams 20:14

So, I was just saying this to someone yesterday, I'm a very intense person, but also I'm a very intense writer. So, when I started my second novel, I'd written a whole first draft of one and I was like: 'I'm not really vibing with it, I don't know, I don't really love it'. And so I just got rid of it. And I was like: 'I'm just going to start a new one'. And so that evening, I put my headphones on, I had my laptop, and I was like: 'Just write, just write how you're feeling'. And so I just wrote this 10,000 words. And then I sort of looked up, and it was like 3am and I was like: 'I haven't eaten all day'. And that's how I write I just get into it. And I can't think...

Alison 20:54

You're in the zone and everything else goes out.

Candice Carty-Williams 20:56

Everything else goes. I can't see anything. My phone is there, but I'm not really engaging in it. And I think, but also, I think that's why I write at night best because it means that there's no distractions because I'm very easily distracted. And if someone is like: 'Hi, are you okay?', I'll be like: 'Why? Are you okay? Is everything alright?' So, it's best if I turn my phone off. It's alright when everyone is asleep because if I never turn my phone off. I'm like: 'What if something's happened and someone is calling me?' And so, and so I finished, and I was like: 'You should eat something because you can't see properly right now'. And I just ended up having loads of cashew nuts. And so what I do is - it's usually cashew nuts, cashews are like, my thing because like, I like how they taste. And they're like, quite good energy, I mean, it's a lot of energy in them. So a lot of calories in them, which I'm not a calorie counter, but I know that cashews are quite extreme.

Alison 21:50

But they are delicious. They really are delicious.

Candice Carty-Williams 21:52

So delicious. So, cashews and then like lots of water. And I don't drink coffee or anything. So, nothing like that keeps me going. So, like cashews are my snack. And I have got a massive sweet tooth, but the sweet tooth will come as, like, that will be rewarded when I've, like, done the work. If that makes sense.

Jimi 22:09

Obviously, you've spoken as well about going on the writers' retreat offered by the author Jojo Moyes, who kind of gave you a week and you're very candid and generous about the importance of that and having that space and time to kind of breathe *Queenie* into life as it were. Was that the situation during that week, then? Because you wrote - correct me if I'm wrong - you wrote 40,000 words within that week?

Candice Carty-Williams 22:35

Yeah, no, I did as is.

Jimi 22:36

Yeah, which is incredible. So, was it just as you've suggested previously, had it been there? Was it just building throughout the years that this kind of story in these things that you wanted to say were all just amassing, really, and you kind of managed to spill them out in that period?

Candice Carty-Williams 22:54

Yeah, I think so, I think it was a case of like, so *Queenie* is like it's a year and a life of this one girl, right. And so it was basically just a lot of experiences that I'd heard, that I'd seen, that I'd understood, that I'd been like growing with and like learning and because it's about, like, it's about her value, ultimately. So she gets up to a lot of stuff and she's going through heartbreak, but is in essence about her value. And so just as a black woman, understanding what my value is, and understanding how I'm seen, and just I think, you know, a lot of the stereotypes are thrown at her are the stereotypes that a lot of black women understand. So, it's not just me. So, it's not just a personal experience. It's very much a universal one that's like been boiled down into one experience. And so I remember just being like, this is what she's going to go through. And so I basically amplify lots of things that have happened and loads of situations that do occur. So lots of stuff in the workplace. I've been lucky in that I've worked in some really good workplaces, but I have always been the only black woman there. But I do understand that like, there are some horror stories and I have had some experiences where I've been like, that's just like out and out racism and I don't really know why there's nothing I can really say, because I'm really outnumbered. And so, it's basically distilling these experiences and amplifying them to make something that a lot of people, so many people, understood as like their experience and their story. And so yeah, so it was like a very easy thing to write and if I do write a sequel, again I'm like that's a breeze because like, it's all there and it's all just how we exist and I think because I have such an imagination which works against me a lot of the time. It was so... It felt like an outpouring and it felt like a really good thing to do. But in terms of eating there when I arrived there, there was a cottage on the grounds...

Jimi 24:45

Where was it? Was it Suffolk?

Candice Carty-Williams 24:48

It's Suffolk, I had to sign an NDA. So just when you asked where it was, I just suddenly got really scared!

Jimi 24:55

I've revealed the location! I think I've got a postcode here, actually [laughs].

Candice Carty-Williams 25:00

You've said Suffolk, so we'll go with Suffolk. An undisclosed location. And so I borrowed my friend's car, and I drove there, and as I said, I hadn't driven since I passed my test, maybe like five years prior. But I was like: 'No, you can do it again'. So, the fishbone is there. If there's an obstacle, you're going to get through it. And so I drove there and then when I pulled up Jojo's husband was there. And he was like: 'Okay, yeah, there's like, this is what you need. This is this, this is this, and there's food'. And I was like: 'Okay, cos I was going go to the shop'. And he was like: 'Oh, you don't really need to', and then he sort of left. And he'd bought me a loaf of fresh baked bread. And I was like: 'What is it? My God, this is so luxurious'. And I sort of like went to make a cup of tea and I saw that they had stocked the fridge and the cupboards with food from Waitrose. And I was like: 'Whoa!'. I remember just being like, so amazed that like, I had access to this food, and also this, like, amazing place. And I was just, I was really overwhelmed actually. And I think a lot of the writing 40,000 words was basically me being like: 'You have to earn your keep, because you have been like, put in this amazing cottage with like, all of the scenery, and like all this silence and all of this space for the first time in your life'. And the food was a really big part of it.

Jimi 26:22

Yeah, I mean, and it's an incredible gift. And I think what's important, though, and this is almost like going back to the fishbone, again, a lot of people might have just been overwhelmed by the pressure of that situation and been sort of paralysed by: 'Oh God, I finally got the time. How am I going to do it? I need to find distractions, or I've run out of excuses', essentially, but... but you didn't and that's wholly to your credit. And I think it maybe says something about you and *Queenie*, the story that kind of, you know, you needed to tell as it were.

Candice Carty-Williams 26:57

Thank you. I think it was just that I've always, I mean, I've tried never to take situations and good things for granted. I always, I'm always very, very, very grateful. And so like, even in this time, which is like a very tough time. I'm always very grateful. I'm not, you know, I'm like, I'm fine. You know, it's lonely, and it's hard, but like, I'm safe and well, my friends are safe and well, my family are safe and well. And that's really important. I think that's the thing that's kind of got me through this just by being grateful for what is there even though sometimes things were really bad. But in terms of pressure, like, definitely, definitely but also just gratitude kind of overtook that in a way.

Alison 27:33

I wanted to ask you, you worked in publishing before, so you must have known what to expect when *Queenie* was published. But what surprised you most when it became such a success?

Candice Carty-Williams 27:46

Do you know what I honestly wasn't expecting any of the success of it. And I'm not just saying that. I'm not just saying that to say that I mean that I've seen how, I've seen I've been in the industry, I've seen how things go, I've seen how things work. And I remember saying, I remember saying you know, it's like a black Bridget Jones because I wanted people to understand it as a commercial book, rather than one of those books by black authors that just gets tucked away. Because there were lots of those, I saw lots of those come and go when I was working in publishing, I remember being like: 'This isn't fair'. And I very much operate on fairness and what is right and then obviously living in the world is a very mad place because you're like: 'Oh, that's not how it should be. But there we are'. And so I remember being that I'm going to just do my best, I'm going to do all the press that comes, I'm going to work really hard and I'm just going to be honest, and I'm going to be authentic because I try to be that in my life anyway. I try to be honest, authentic, because honesty saves time, a lot of the time. And I think that it's important to be real and I remember just being like, you can only be yourself. And I remember you know it's hard because I'd seen so many authors come and go who were like white middle class and it felt like that was the way you have to be, that felt like that was the right way to like get your book published first of all because that was what I'd seen and that's what we've seen. And then to be a different person's person that I was, but I was like I'm not, I'm very much from South London. I didn't grow up with my knee, didn't grow up ... I don't know... you can only be yourself because there's no point lying because you'll get caught out. And so I remember doing that and I remember just being surprised when so many people liked it. I remember all the reviews, I was waiting for someone to say like it's not good because also I was entering a very new space, like books by black authors at the time were not a thing so like there has been a huge surge now and I really hope it is going to stay I think it's really amazing but at the time, I was like the only young black author in the UK who was doing any of that stuff. And so I was like waiting, waiting, waiting for that bad review, but all of them were really good and I was like: 'Oh okay, like they're not being...' because I was expecting someone to be harsh or politely pick it apart. Yeah, that never happened though I did have a friend who was like: 'Hey, bro really great see all the stuff happening, don't worry about the FT review'. And I was like: 'Sorry?', and she was like: 'Oh, don't worry about it, don't worry about it'.

Jimi 30:16

Always helpful those ones.

Candice Carty-Williams 30:19

But I think apart from that, I remember just being so... and still to this day, I'm always so surprised that it did wait deeds, because for a debut by a black author it was like a really surprising thing at the time, just because the landscape had been very white for such a long time.

Jimi 30:41

Yeah, yeah, completely.

Alison 30:43

The landscape was very white but at the same time, *Queenie* - certainly when she's pitching all those stories to her editor - the thing that struck me was how... how timely the book coming out and the stories that she was pitching were. I mean, just because it, you know, she was wanting to promote Black Lives Matters and of course, in last year, that was so timely.

Candice Carty-Williams 31:03

Well I think... I mean, the Black Lives Matter thing was in the book, because it was something that I'd been witnessing and it was really hard and I remember finding it so hard. I remember, on the day that Philando Castile was killed going into work, and having read about it and seeing it very briefly on the news, and being in this communal kitchen, making a cup of tea and crying because it was so horrible to see. And it was so hard and everyone just walking past and getting on with their days and seeing me crying as well. And not really understanding why and not wanting to get involved or ask what was wrong, which I think is quite mad because if I saw someone crying in my office, I would ask. And so the hard thing is like the need for Black Lives Matter has always been there. And so it's a resurgence in the last year because of the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd have been really heartbreaking, because it is something that has been an undercurrent of society, and it should have been at the forefront of everything that everyone was talking about all the time. But for some reason, no one had any space for it. And it wasn't important in all of these killings. Again, we have a very different system of racism here. So we don't have... it's not the same level of violence, or death but there are still instances, like Mark Duggan, again, completely took me out like I had, I couldn't believe it and I still can't believe it. And so all of these things will always go into my work, because there are things that are really important because I see them, and why doesn't everyone else see them? And why doesn't everyone else talk about them? And so this year, everyone, last year, sorry, everyone was talking about Black Lives Matter and marching and it being in the news and it being... but again, like being presented as like an enemy, you know, this whole like, this group that were like, you know, dominating and taking over. It was a really hard thing to see. But again, a good thing to see because it was more public.

Jimi 33:07

Yeah, yeah. No, I completely know what you mean and I think that notion in terms of critical language at the moment, people are like: 'Oh, this was before its time', and 'Oh, I saw it coming', but I think the reality is it was happening, but nobody wanted to talk about it, or think about it or deal with it. And yeah, as you say, I feel like *Queenie*, its continued success as part of the conversation, it's been in dialogue with other works like Reni Eddo-Lodge's book and Bernadine Evaristo, and it's kind of really brought these discussions to people that wouldn't necessarily be having them that don't necessarily have black people in their social circle and stuff. And I wondered what's your... what has that kind of been like to be at, the kind of eye of the storm as it were, in terms of people's understanding of black people's lives and, you know, the life of like a black woman growing up in London? Like has it been strange to be the focal point and have people coming to you I'm sure with things that they've discovered through reading *Queenie* and finding your book?

Candice Carty-Williams 34:19

Sometimes it's amazing and sometimes it's quite hard. So, I think, I mean, just living as a black woman anyway, there's always been a point of being invisible, but also hyper visible. So I guess the invisibility is people are not seeing you as the person that you are. And the hyper visibility is you're the only black person in a room a lot of the time, but no one actually sees who you are so that's a really, really hard thing. And so *Queenie* was it was kind of was written to redress so much of that in a way. And I think it's been... I mean, I've always loved the messages that I get from... I remember getting a message from this younger white woman who was like: 'I've got a daughter with a black man, and I was just going to

raise her as white because I'm white. But I've read your book and I understand that, actually, she'll have a very different upbringing to mine, because she looks different'. I mean, to most people it's obvious, but to a lot of people it's not. And so, I was like: 'Wow'. And I'm really grateful that that kid will have that... that her mum will now understand that, like, she requires different things. And she requires different support in her life. So I get loads of messages and lots of like: 'I feel less lonely', or like: 'Oh, my God, it's like you stole my diary, and all of those things', but then when it comes to... I think it's hard when people... because you're in that space, people then think that you are at the hub of information. And that is the tough thing. So I remember when that week of like, when Black Lives Matter was like really, like really shouting. I remember having to turn my phone off a lot, because lots of my white friends and white colleagues and associates would be messaging me being like: 'Hi, can I have a reading list on what to...?' and I'd be like: 'Whoa', and it's just a very... I would never, I would never ask a friend from a marginalised or different group for a reading list on anything because it'd be like, go and look for yourself. I go look for myself because I know that that person doesn't exist as a teacher.

Jimi 36:47

You mentioned people saying, 'Oh, it's like you've seen my diary' - that must have been weird to navigate that people are... do feel like they have sort of know you intimately now and know everything that's going on. So, has that been something that you've had to kind of knock back at times to make it clear that *Queenie* isn't necessarily you, that you're not completely interchangeable?

Candice Carty-Williams 37:10

Yeah, I feel like it's the thing. That's the question that I get asked the most. Like, I find it quite hard because it's... I would never say... I saw a film last year, early last year, called *Rocks*, I was invited to a screening. And it was written by Theresa Ikoko. It is incredible. She has been listed for a long list of Baftas or something. But it's about a young black girl growing up, and her mum isn't very well and she has to look after her brother and it is incredibly heartbreaking. And I know that the writer, Theresa Ikoko, is a black woman, but not for one second did I think that that was her life story. This is a woman who's written a film, you know. So, I think there is something that happens when it comes to... I think the fact that our stories are so few and far between still, is like, if you've written something, you can't have an imagination, it must be your pain and your trauma that you're just putting on a page, and it's like: 'No, no, like, we have imaginations as well'. Like, you know, that's part of being, you know, a writer it's my job. And so that's really hard. And also it's kind of like, what I've written in the book, when I realise that people think it's me, or a friend's parents have read it...

Jimi 38:19

I was just going to ask about your parents or family as well. So yeah. Are there any specific incidences where people have messed up? I mean, maybe we shouldn't get into it. But yeah...

Candice Carty-Williams 38:29

I mean, my actual family, let me tell you something. My mum hasn't read it, cos she was like, I'm dyslexic, so you know, I'm not a reader. And I was like: 'Okay'. My sister was like: 'I started it but I had other things to do, don't really like books, you know...', I was like: 'Okay'. My big brother read it and I was like: 'Cool' and he was like: 'I don't want to talk about anything, okay?'. And I was like: 'No, no, no, no, no'. And he was like: 'Can, I don't want to talk about anything? Let's just leave it but well done'. And

I was like: 'Okay, thank you'. And then, my dad hasn't read it. So, like, my family haven't really, they haven't read it. And my nan calls it my 'little project'. Like she doesn't care. Like she's, just like, when are you getting married? When are you going to have a grandchild? Before I die, please.

Alison 39:16

Nothing to keep you grounded!

Candice Carty-Williams 39:17

All the time. So they haven't. But it's mainly that anyone who has read it, if it's like a friend's parent, because a lot of my friends' parents who are so sweet, they're like, they go and buy the book and they're like: Look, I've got Candice's book, and I'm going to put it on the shelf, I'm going to read it'. And a lot of them I have to be like: 'Hi, just so you know that I am not...' because I'm just like: 'I know what you think, that even though I'm 31 and your child is 31 I'm corrupting your child in some way because I'm that character'. And, so yeah, for me, that is a thing. It's like suddenly being like: 'Oh my God, I remember having to Google the cover. I needed a cover really quickly'. So I googled, like, *Queenie* and I am on Google and you know it has like a list of questions frequently asked? And the first one was like: 'Is *Queenie* a true story?' and I was like: 'I think I have to put it in my bio like clearly *Queenie* isn't my life story', please. Yeah. I'm looking forward to when I write more work, people being like: 'Oh, she has a body of work and she can't have done all of these things. So, but she must not be *Queenie*'.

Alison 40:15

She really does have a really good imagination.

Candice Carty-Williams 40:18

Yes.

Alison 40:19

Are you also a people watcher because you really describe loads of personalities throughout the book? Where do you get that inspiration from?

Candice Carty-Williams 40:26

So yeah, I'm very much. I don't know, if I'm an introvert. I don't think I'm an introvert. I think I'm just someone who is an extrovert who's probably quite antisocial. But that just comes from shyness. It doesn't come from anything else. I'm quite a shy person. And I just have a lot of stuff of being like: 'Why would you say that?' Because I don't want to hear that. And so like, interviews are fine, because it's like you're being asked the question, but in terms of your conversation, I'm not very good at, I just get in my head. And I'm just like, what, no one cares anyway. So that's why I have a therapist, guys. It's so good. And so I spent, I've spent a lot of time in my life, just watching people and observing them and listening. And I love listening to people. And I grew up as I said, with, like a really, really, that my nan is like a massive character she is absolutely, she's so emotional, and so mad with it. But also like quite cold. And she's got like five daughters. So we're all like equally, like bonkers. And then all of the grandkids. And so I was always acquired, to one of everyone, so I would just be sitting watching all of this Sami drama, and then my nan would just say something like: 'Well, anyway, Can's the only one that I love. And I be like: 'Oh my God, you've ruined everything for me'. And I've just grown up in this, like, I've

grown up with, like with very chaotic people around and just sort of watching them and just be like: 'Wow'. And so yeah, I think that's where it comes from. I think it just comes from a love of watching people and understanding them.

Jimi 41:51

You touched on families there and your family. And there's a family that is quite fractured and separated at the heart of your new novel, *People Person*, which is about five half siblings who kind of come together. This wasn't the novel that you necessarily thought would be the follow up to *Queenie* initially?

Candice Carty-Williams 42:16

No, I didn't. So I knew I wasn't going to write a sequel as yet, because I just knew that wasn't going to happen. My editor told me that wasn't going to happen. She was like: 'No, I didn't want to see someone who just becomes like the *Queenie* author', and I was like: 'Oh, okay'. So she very much had my best interests at heart, you know. And so the first that I wrote was about grief, like purely about grief. And I remember finding that quite hard to write. But it was important because I lost two friends, like when I was 25, but in quite quick succession. And so grief has always been a big part of my life. It's one of those things that is a real sticking point for me. And I remember halfway through writing it, my uncle passed away. That was like three years ago, but I didn't really have a relationship with him. He was my dad's brother. And obviously, all these things come about where you're like: 'Should I have known him more? How could I have known him more?', but also, like, I knew of him when I was really young, you know, it was really hard. And so writing, it was a really tough thing. And then editing it, I was editing it when the pandemic was sort of, like, you know, in its first wave and the grief was so hard to process, because so many people were passing away and grief on such a large scale was so painful, because you're feeling for so many people. And again, you know, the numbers are horrific. And every number is a person with a family or kids. And, you know, I remember like Belly Mujinga, who worked at Victoria Station, and had a daughter and passed away, and yeah, we're just you know, and so I was like: 'This is not what I want to write'. And so I kind of, I just got rid of it and I started thinking again. I said to my sister, I remember just sort of saying that: 'You know what would happen if like, you know, da-da-da', and she was like: 'We would all come and sort it out'. And I was like: 'What?' And she was like: 'We would', and I was like: 'Oh', and I mean she's right. She's honest, she would but like it's got me thinking about that bond that you do have. So, I don't really talk to many of my half siblings, but I know that if they needed me, I'm there like, because that's my family, you know. And so it's very much about these five people coming together because they have to.

Alison 44:25

So when's the new book out? I can't wait to read it.

Candice Carty-Williams 44:28

Feb 2022.

Jimi 44:30

I mean, that was such an incredible conversation, Candice. Thank you so much for your time, for your wisdom, for your incredible fishbone story. It's been a total honour and we can't wait to see your upcoming projects and whatever else comes next. Thanks for joining us.

Candice Carty-Williams 44:50

Thank you so much. That was such fun!

Jimi 44:57

You've been listening to Life on a Plate from Waitrose. I'm Jimi Famurewa, thank you to my co-host Alison Oakervee, and our guest, Candice Carty-Williams. To learn more about the series, go to waitrose.com/podcast, and please subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.