Anthony (ACH) Smith
In conversation with Andrew Kelly
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Andrew Kelly: In April we showed *The Newcomers*, a BBC series from 1964 that featured a young couple, Alison and Anthony Smith. It also featured many others from Bristol at the time, including Tom Stoppard. And most of all it featured the city of Bristol. I'm joined by Anthony (ACH) Smith. We're going to be talking about the series and what happened after. Thank you very much for joining us.

Anthony Smith: Good to be here.

Andrew: Let's start with *The Newcomers*. Fifty-eight years on, what do you think about it now?

Anthony: The quick answer is that when I saw it this time around, I was really impressed with what John Boorman had done, and Jim Saunders, his cameraman. I thought it beautifully made. But that's my latest and current view. You will, of course, remember – because you organised it – that about a dozen years ago we had a showing at Watershed and I didn't enjoy that one much. I was mostly embarrassed. I'm not quite sure what by actually. I think probably our own performances, but also the chutzpah of thinking anyone might be interested in all this. I didn't have those reservations this time around. I forgot about our performances. I didn't pay any attention to them. I paid attention to what the camera was doing and what the film editor, mostly John Merritt, who used to live in West Shrubbery over the road, was doing. I was just admiring it filmicly and thinking oh, yes, the man who made these went on to have a pretty glittering career in Hollywood. But at that time, he was a blue-eyed boy of BBC documentaries.

Andrew: I want to come back to Boorman and some of the others involved in a moment. But clearly there is interest in this film, because on both occasions we've shown it, we've sold out. And I know there's been talk about releasing the series alongside other early John Boorman work on DVD, for example, and we'd certainly like to show more of it. There were members of the family in the audience, and also some of the other people in the film like Derek Balmer, for example. What did they think of it?

Anthony: Nobody said a bad word to me afterwards, and lots of people said a good word to me about it. I had the impression it went down very well. I mean, we had a fairly sustained applause at the end. Now, whether they were clapping us or clapping you for having the imagination to put this on, make it available to the public, or whether they were clapping the city of Bristol, I don't know.

One of the nice responses was when we first showed it a dozen years ago at Watershed. With a brief intro from me and then an interval the whole thing was four hours. And Helen Holland, who was then leader of the Labour Party in Bristol, so clearly a woman with plenty on her plate, and also a woman I like and to whom I'm very distantly related, she tells me, by three married, you know, step-this and… – I caught her at the end, she was there, sat all through the four hours, this is the first time we'd shown it, and I thought I ought to say I'm sorry to keep for keeping so long, Helen. And she said, 'I'd have been very happy sitting here till midnight.' And I interpret that as meaning how patriotic she is about the city of Bristol and how much she saw what Bristol was and mostly still is to this day.

I think that's why we got a sustained applause at the end this time – it's people feeling, 'I love Bristol and I like the pictures that John Boorman gave me of it.'

Andrew: Let's talk about Boorman and some of the other people involved. You mentioned John Boorman's glittering rise. It was a remarkable rise, wasn't it? He made *The Newcomers* '63/ '64, the year [1965] after *Catch Us If You Can* with the Dave Clark Five, two years later he was in Hollywood making films with Lee Marvin.

Anthony: I wrote a memoir that came out about ten years ago and in it I said that when I watched *Point Blank* for the first time it was like watching the bowler who last Saturday took nought for 80 against a Second XI bowl out the West Indians at Lord's. I mean, it was to me inexplicable, actually. I won't say entirely unexpected because he was a very ambitious and committed filmmaker, so he knew he was going somewhere, but nevertheless, *Point Blank* is a wonderful film, beautifully made, and I was just bowled over by it.

Andrew: Tell us about what the BBC was like at the time because he was Head of Documentaries, I think, for BBC West as it existed then, and he'd already made a series called *Citizen 63*, which we hope to show at some point. Someone came up to me after the showing on Saturday and said they were in a film with Boorman, as a young girl, called *The Sculpture* [the correct title is *The Quarry*] which I'm now looking into for her.

Anthony: Find it, Andrew, find it. It's a gem. It created a stir at the time. It's a little bit risqué.

Andrew: All right, we will look into that and see if we can get that one shown as well. But what was the BBC like then? Were they regarded as great innovators at that time?

Anthony: No. Boorman always said that they looked askance at him when he was appointed. He'd been working for Southern TV and Southampton, and then got this job, and he said that there were people looking out of the corner their eyes at him thinking he was not quite the kind of chap that were used to employing in the corporation. And I had a bit of a taste of that myself at one time, which I won't go into, it's my story, but that didn't worry him because he was always going to be a lone rider. And he came in with the ambition of doing exactly what he did, which was to create a new sort of television for the BBC. I can't pretend to be a television historian – you're probably better at that than I am – but I don't think anyone before, in any channel, had made the kind of films that *Citizen 63* were, which were films about ordinary people. The TV audience was used to only seeing people they already knew about, and suddenly here were complete strangers and we were asked to be interested in them for 30 minutes. And it caught on and led to *The Newcomers*, a much longer, six-part series.

Andrew: And there were many other people involved in the film. The morning we showed it, I led a little walk around Bristol, showing people some of the sights in *The Newcomers*, and also talked about some of the people involved and certainly some of the people involved like, for example, George Brandt at the University of Bristol, who was really quite a significant man in terms of theatre, as well, and film.

Anthony: Oh, George, in his very large head had, I think, the history of European theatre. I mean, for instance, he'd written a book on eighteenth-century theatre in Holland. A pretty recherché subject, I'll agree, but George knew it. He was a fabulous, learned man, but he was also a man who was immensely generous in sharing what was in his head. He was a natural teacher, he just loved to share information and steer people in directions that he thought they would be interested in going.

Andrew: There are many people we can talk about in the film, but one I focused on particularly was – I took people to Gordon Road and showed them where Val Lorraine lived. And she's a very significant figure, isn't she, in Bristol theatre, but much unknown?

Anthony: Absolutely. She'd been a professional actress since wartime. I think she probably came to Bristol to work for the BBC in the war, and she was an announcer, a radio continuity announcer and doing the jobs they do, weather and that kind of thing. And she, like so many of us, succumbed to the fatal charms of Bristol and couldn't get away and so stayed here. She went on to act a bit. She never had a big, flashy career but she got some work.

She and her husband, Bob Lorraine, who was one of the three brothers who ran a building firm, acquired that gorgeous little Georgian house just behind the Student Union. I've forgotten the name of the road now – names are getting difficult. It doesn't matter. And she would occasionally take a lodger. She wasn't running a boarding house, but she had a room and she would let it out if there was somebody who wanted somewhere to stay for a bit. And that's where Tom [Stoppard] was. She was charging him two pounds a week, and that included supper most evenings. And I once said to her, years later I said, 'Val, two quid a week, even in the late '50s and early '60s, including a meal, is ridiculous.' And she said, 'I just thought he might have it in him to become a good writer.' And I remember I said, 'I wish you'd gone to Ladbrokes and put a couple of quid on him at that point.'

Val was, in effect, the mother of actors in Bristol, her house was the mecca for them. I think there's probably one of them in most big cities with a theatre company, but Val was the one in Bristol. Hence, in 1962, Peter O'Toole, having just made *Lawrence of Arabia*, suddenly turned up at Val's house one lunchtime. And, of course, she was delighted to see him. And he said, 'there's so many people in Bristol I want to catch up with, and I haven't got much time, I think the only answer is for me to hold a party and invite them all.' And Val said, 'Oh, that's a good idea, Peter.' And he said, 'Can I have it here?' And she said, 'Yes, sure, of course.' He said, 'This evening all right?' And suddenly, the requisites for a party, food and drink and phone calls to invite people and put the word around, in fact O'Toole enlisted me as a taxi driver for a while. And we had this party.

And a lot of things happened at that party, some of which I put in my memoir, but the one I can recount in public, is that at about three in the morning the party was still going, and there was a very nice-looking girl from Lebanon there who looked at her watch and said, 'Oh, it's late on, I must get home to St Paul's. Can I get a taxi?' and O'Toole said, 'I'll give you a lift. I've got a car here. Jump in.' She jumped in, and they were driving from Clifton to St Paul's, and O'Toole was going down Park Street, but having just spent the best part of the year, I think it was, in America and Spain, making *Lawrence of Arabia* and after a long party with, I expect, the odd glass, he wasn't quite sure whether he should drive on the left-hand side or the right-hand side of the road. So he did what he thought was a very sensible thing, which is to split the difference. He started going down Park Street on one side and then switched to the other side thinking he'd get it half right. And a police car observed this manoeuvre with interest and he wound up in in the cells for the night. And he said, I think he made this up, but he said that when he said to the duty sergeant who was booking him in, 'I'm Peter O'Toole,' the duty sergeant said, 'That's funny. We had that Laurence Olivier here only last week.'

O'Toole was up in court at 11 that morning. I didn't know cases could happen that quickly. Maybe it's if you're a very famous actor they like to get rid of you. I don't know. But he was up in court at 11 that morning and banned from driving for, I think, about three months. This left him stuck in Bristol with a new Mini when Minis were *the* car to have, the cutting edge of fashion and style to have a Mini, and of course O'Toole had one. And he had to leave it in Bristol. So he asked me if I would take care of it until the next time I could find time to drive it to [London]. And I said I was delighted, and I managed to find that it was quite impossible for me to get to London for another two weeks. Meanwhile, I was zipping around Bristol in a Mini. And then I finally delivered it to his house in Hampstead. That came out of out of that party.

Sorry, we've got off Val Lorraine. Val Lorraine was the fairy godmother for the theatrical industry in Bristol. She was a lovely warm woman, and Tom has remained grateful to her all his life since. When she was within days of dying, she was in a care home over just the other side of the suspension bridge from Clifton, and Tom came to see her and it was interesting. I went in with him because I knew Val well. And we talked to Val for a while, then went out for a fag in those days. And then Tom said, 'I think I'll just go back for a moment on my own.' And he stayed about 15-20 minutes and I didn't mind because it was obvious to me that he mattered so much to Val that he had to spend that time with just the two of them together at the end, and then she died within days.

Andrew: I think it's one of those stories about Bristol. It's not covered in the film, and she's not mentioned in the film, but she played such an important role in the lives of many people. We've always wanted to do a project called Val's House, in fact, which looks at the people who stayed there and the people she supported and the parties she had.

There are so many people we could talk about in *The Newcomers*, but like you, I watched *The Newcomers* this time specifically to watch Boorman's filmmaking techniques. And clearly he was deeply versed in things like the French New Wave, new British cinema of the time, it keeps coming through time and time again. But what really brought it home to me was just the sheer quality of the filmmaking that was pretty consistent across all six episodes.

Anthony: That's what gave me most pleasure this time around, watching that. Jim Saunders was the main cameraman, there were one or two others, but he was the lead cameraman if there was such a position. And Boorman fancied he knew his way around a film camera and the lighting, and he really admired Jim Saunders' work. And he said to me, 'Jim has a way of lighting a scene which follows no rules whatsoever, and yet it's always terrific. And I study what he does for myself, and try to work out what he's doing. How does he do it?' I still don't understand, he's a law unto himself.

Andrew: Another thing which really struck me this time around, though I've enjoyed it very much before, was the role the music plays in the film, both the kind of theme tune that goes throughout all six episodes, but also the jazz music that appears. Was it a composer called Dave Lee, a musician called Dave Lee?

Anthony: Yes. It's interesting, that. In my introduction when we showed the films at the Arnolfini, I quoted Boorman saying he depends on accidents. The best things in his films, he thinks, are always accidents. That music is an accident. We'd been asked by friends to look after a clavichord for what turned out to be the best part of the year. An eighteenth-century keyboard twangy thing. Lovely noise but not the sort of thing that people like us at that time would normally have around their house. But there it was. Alison plays the piano so she knows her way around a keyboard. And she found some music somewhere by John Dowland, a Tudor era composer, and one of them was 'Melancholy Galliard' and she liked it and started rehearsing it on this clavichord and it sounded lovely. And Boorman heard her playing this and that became the theme tune to *The Newcomers*, but rearranged by Dave Lee with saxophones and things that John Dowland knew nothing of. And I think it works extremely well. But it would have been something entirely different if it hadn't been for the accident of that clavichord being there and Alison having the Dowland to play.

Andrew: When I did the walk around Bristol with the group, I told them some of the stories from the film and showed them some of the pictures that we've managed to find of Bristol at the time, and there were two that really struck a chord with them. The first was when we stood outside 59 Prince Street and I told them the story about the Pen and the dockworkers waving their books to get work,

and we talked a little bit then about how precarious labour is these days for some people, but of course then it was probably even worse, that kind of labour.

Anthony: I've got scenes about this in the play I did for the Bristol Old Vic about the docks, *Up the Feeder, Down the Mouth*. I talked to dockers and got a pretty good impression of how things were. In fact, thanks to Boorman – Boorman reckons he was the first and possibly remained the only film crew allowed ever to film what actually went on because everyone, the dockers but also the stevedores prancing around up there, and probably the dock's labour board themselves, who employed them, was ashamed of the system. They all thought it was a dreadful system, but nobody had managed to figure out a better system. And what the dockers all told me was it was corrupt because it was riddled with favouritism.

Five hundred men would pack in. How many of them were going to get a job that day depended on how busy the dock was. Monday was always the busiest day of the week. Some days, ships were moored three deep along the waterfront, near where the Lloyds Bank area is now. Other days, it would be quieter and not many people would get a job. And you got a job by crowding in there – and it's not a big space for 500 people – crowding in there with your black book to show you were a registered dock worker, and you held up your book and the stevedore would prance up and down saying you, you, you and you. And according to dockers, nine times out of ten they were just choosing their favourites, possibly their second cousin or something. It was a very corrupt and unfair system. And the way the dockers talked about it, you've got to be one of the blue eyes, and I wrote a song for my show called 'Blue Eyes'. 'Blue eyes, blue eyes, your eyes are so blue, the stevedore's taken a fancy to you.' I won't sing it for you.

Andrew: The other story which I told them was about the job you'd just left, or left recently in the film, which was running the arts page at the Western Daily Press. And not only did I tell them that that arts page existed, that it was full broadsheet size, and that it covered the kind of areas that the top-quality Sunday review sections would cover.

Anthony: That was a reflection of what Tom and I – Tom was co-editor, he wasn't employed but in effect we jointly edited that page - were interested in. But most of all, it reflected what Richard Hawkins was interested in.

Just give me a minute of Bristol newspaper history here. In the 1930s, the Northcliffe Press were taking over as much as the provincial press as they could, including in Derby, nearly your native city. And suddenly they were onto Bristol. They were going to buy up everything that called itself a newspaper in Bristol and that would be Northcliffe. And a group of two people – one was the Bishop of Malmesbury, I'm not quite sure how he got involved, but he did, and the other one was Walter Hawkins. And they said this isn't good enough, we don't know about Derby and Newcastle and Chester but Bristol is an independent city and will not have the Northcliffe group running its papers.

Of course, things in 2022 are now very different, but that's a different subject. This was in the 1930s. They started the *Bristol Evening Post*, which used to have the subtitle 'the paper all Bristol asked for and helped to create'. And within two years, they were doing so well that they bought out the paper Northcliffe had started, the *Bristol Evening World*. Now, it was then the case that the *Bristol Evening Post* vastly outsold the *Bristol Evening World*. But the *Bristol Evening World*, where Tom worked for a while, and people like David Foote, and I could name a lot of very good and well-known journalists, including a man who went on to edit *The Times*, the *Bristol Evening World* was a very well-written, well-laid out paper with very little money, but it was shrewdly spent.

The *Bristol Evening Post*, I have to tell you, which I came to Bristol to work for – that was my first job, I was a trainee sub-editor on the *Bristol Evening Post* – was not a vastly entertaining paper. It was a kind of stuffy mouthpiece for the establishment. But Walter Hawkins' son, Richard, who was designated, because he was his son, to take over the family business eventually, but didn't because his only interest was music – he wanted to be a composer, and so he left in the end to go into the music business. Richard had tastes like Tom and I had, and like a lot of people had. We sold 2,000 copies more every – initially, it was Wednesday, and then it became Monday – the day the arts page came out than on other days of the week. There's no other explanation, it was the only different thing in a paper. So we were selling 2,000 copies of the arts page. And, of course, more people who didn't buy it for that purpose nevertheless read it. I like to think we made a difference. We published poems by Ted Hughes, and I could go on, and that's why it looked different.

I'd been moved from the *Bristol Evening Post* across to the *Western Daily Press*, because it was now under all under the same ownership. I've been moved on to the paper and soon after that Richard said, 'I'd like to start an arts page and I'd like you to edit it.' And that's how it happened. It only survived for about two and a half years because an extremely philistine editor, Eric Price – I'll name him because a lot of people will remember him – took over and did wonders in increasing the circulation of the paper. When it was first taken over by the *Evening Post* it was at its own request. The *Western Daily Press* went to the *Evening Post* and said, 'if you don't take us over, we're done for, we'll fold.' It was an old paper, the *Western Daily Press*, Victorian origins. And it was selling so few copies at that time, including when it was employing a young journalist called Tom Stoppard, that the rev counter on the printing machine was covered with tape so that nobody except the man running the printing machine knew how few copies were coming off. And Eric Price made a huge difference. Suddenly the graph went up and up and up. But, of course, that meant his power went up and up and after about two and a half years, he was in a position to smash the arts page to smithereens.

Andrew: It was a tragedy.

Anthony: People still remember it because we published some good stuff. I won't say everything in it, but there were some good things that we did. And that's how I met Tom. Richard Hawkins said there's a young journalist called Tom Stoppard, you might give some work to him. And I'd met Tom once, and he'd met me once, the same meeting. We hadn't liked the look of each other at all. But I gritted my teeth and invited him to write a piece on any subject he chose, really. And he said, 'Oh, I'll write something on the new wave in French cinema.' I thought I'd have my work cut out with editing that when it comes in. And when it came in, I didn't change a comma. It was beautiful. I thought, who is this, and that's how our friendship again.

Andrew: One of the most enjoyable moments I've had was going through your complete page clippings from that time. You have your enormous folder full of them and very kindly let me take a look at them at some point.

Let's move on to the follow-up. Ten years later, there was a programme called *Deadly Serious Smith*, which was made by Colin Rose at the BBC. What did you think about that as a programme? I always took that as being slightly more tongue-in-cheek to be honest, the times I've seen it.

Anthony: It was written by me with my tongue in my cheek. Because of the difficult experience that we, Alison and I, and I think maybe Tom, went through on making the Boorman films. You won't misunderstand me, and I wouldn't want anyone watching this to misunderstand me, it was a fantastic opening for us, an opportunity that led to probably the rest of my life in terms of openings for work, but it was very difficult on a personal level. It put great pressure on us. Boorman by this

time had moved off to Hollywood and was the big Hollywood director. Colin Rose - who was an old friend, he'd been a contemporary of Alison's when they were students at the university - by now working for the BBC, said he'd like to make a 'where are they now?' film, [and] it wasn't just us, he did six on six subjects that John Boorman had filmed. Where are they now, ten years on. You can see a few clips from ten years ago and where they are now, and that was the interest of the film.

In our case, I knew Colin very well, and I could talk very honestly with him. And I said, 'Well, I'd like at least one element of the film that I do with you to just raise a few questions about the kind of documentary filming that Boorman was doing at that time.' Only raise questions, not assail. Not at all. You and I have already talked about *The Newcomers*, wonderful film, I think. But it does raise questions. And so I raised those questions, and the other deal was I write this film. Boorman effectively wrote *The Newcomers* - technically I was one of the screenwriters but I didn't really. So I wrote *Deadly Serious Smith* and it was meant to be a bit of a wink to the viewer about 'you know what's going on really, don't you?'. Which is me playing this kind of meta game of I'm the subject of the film, but actually I'm writing this film, nudge, nudge. It was that kind of tone that that we adopted. I hope we got away with it but I did that on purpose, to add a bit of perspective to people watching *The Newcomers.*

Andrew: And did Boorman see *Deadly Serious Smith*, do you know?

Anthony: I don't know. But I doubt it. Once he left Bristol he probably moved to London to start with. We didn't see anything of him. Well, occasionally. He came about once or twice, once I think at your invitation. He was occasionally to be spotted in Bristol, but he didn't have any enduring committed interest in the city anymore.

Andrew: We did bring him back when we showed *The Newcomers* more than a decade ago, and he did sit through the first episode of *The Newcomers* and he said something like, 'That wasn't as bad as I feared.' Something like that, I think, was his response. But I think that's a fairly common response that people have when they look back at their early work. I didn't realise, actually, that *Deadly Serious Smith* was part of a series. I thought it was a one-off. Were the other films that were made about Bristolian characters or they were just others that Boorman had filmed?

Anthony: They were other characters in Boorman's *Citizen 63.*

Andrew: Right. Now, one of the key things about *The Newcomers* to me is about making your way as a writer in Bristol, making your living as a writer. And the joke is, of course, that your rental on The Paragon building you were in was something like four pounds a week, which when you say that to people now, they chuckle and think that's very cheap. I suspect that you didn't earn a lot more than that at the time.

Anthony: Fifteen quid a week at the paper when I was still a journalist, so it was a quarter of my income, which is about what you're supposed to pay in rent, isn't it?

Andrew: Absolutely. Unlike now, where it's often higher than that.

Over the years, you've published many other books, including novelisations of films, a crime series, which I want to come on to. You've also kept up with some journalism, haven't you, including cricket journalism through the years? How difficult has it been? I was going to say 'how easy', but I can't believe it was easy at all. How difficult is it been to make that living through those decades?

Anthony: It never was easy. But I think every freelancer would agree that. As Boorman says about film, you depend on accidents, you look back and you see how by doing A, that led you to do B and then that naturally went into C. But there's no way you could start at the beginning and say I'll do A and then B and then C, you just do what you can, you do your best, hope that people take notice, and that somebody is in a position to say come and work for me. Not full time, you're not looking for a job, you're looking for one assignment, or maybe, in the case of *The Newcomers,* a year long, but that's how it works.

And so it can get a bit [groans] when you look at your latest bank statement, and I was always miles overdrawn. Banks in those days were very different from banks now. I had a local bank manager called Mr Adams. We never addressed each other by first names, but we got an extremely well. He knew I owed the bank, always, upwards of £2,000, which in those days was a lot more than it sounds now. But he also knew me personally and understood my plan of action, how life works on the principle as I was describing just now, that one thing will lead to another and suddenly we have a breakthrough. And you do.

I've probably about three times in my life had a real breakthrough, and suddenly all my financial problems are gone. Didn't mean forever, but for a while you can breathe easily. Meanwhile, you're raising a family. But one thing that helped this was Alison was almost always in some kind of appointment. She was an actress for a while, but of course not paid very much because, you know, the word 'actress' gives the game away, but enough to help with was what I was earning. And then she became a schoolteacher for 15 years. And of course, then that life was much easier. But it never was easy.

The turning point was a phone call in 1997, I think it was. No, it was earlier than that. 1989. One of my jobs at that time I was doing a day was a week going to Bournemouth and talking about documentary films to the students. And I got back one day and the phone rang and a voice said, 'Anthony, it's Zulfikar Ghose, a very old friend, one of my very oldest friends who I'd known when we were all living in London. I'd been living in Bristol for about 30 years, 40 years by this time, and Ghose was in Texas, at the University of Texas teaching creative writing, and he said, 'Anthony, there's a post of visiting writer coming up in the department very soon. I think you should apply for it if you would like to.' And I said, 'Well, that's a big sing, all the way to Texas, and I've got a family here'. He said, 'Well, think about it, but don't take very long because there are about 100 people applying for it.' And I put the phone down and I remember I had three thoughts. One was he told me what I'd be paid, and I realised that I'd be quite a bit ahead of the bank by the time I finished. Secondly, I like a warm climate, and Texas had the reputation of being that. The third thing was it got me out of Mrs Thatcher's England. I rang him back I think about 10 seconds after I put the phone down, and I said, 'it's Anthony – yes.'

I had a lovely time at Texas. I went full of doubts about, as most writers are, doubts about whether you can teach creative writing, that's what the course is called. But I found what you can do, and one of the things you can do, is you can teach people to read, you can work with them on writers that I admire like Hemingway and Tom and Flannery O'Connor, on one of their locals and so forth. And you can show them how Hemingway shapes his story in this way, and how economically he works. He doesn't need a lot of words, hardly any adverbs. That helps them. I know for a fact that a few of the students I encountered – almost all very nice to know, very good fun as well – a few of them have gone on and made something of a living out of writing. So I'm glad that happened. So that was a big turning point.

What were the [other] two big turning points? The second was the Bristol Old Vic, *Up the Feeder, Down the Mouth*, thanks mostly to Andy Hay, who never got the credit that he deserved. This had a

very successful run at the theatre, but then when it was revived four years later on the waterfront at the docks, it was sold out before the first night because word had gone around from that first run in the theatre. And I did well out of that. I've had three, you know, what that character on telly would call 'nice little earners' that have suddenly come up. None of them, as I say, me sitting here calculating, I know, I'll go and write a bestselling play for the Bristol Old Vic; I know, I'll go to Texas and teach creative writing. They happen. A phone call comes in and suddenly a new yellow brick road opens up in front of you.

The third break I had was to do with Jim Henson – much loved from *The Muppets* [Smith wrote novelisations of two Henson films]. And much loved by me, he was a very, very sweet, kind man, and lovely to work for because he was kind and helpful and listened to your arguments and occasionally respected them but also had a firm idea about what was right and wrong. And unlike most film companies, the book of the film mattered to him – it wasn't just a cynical rip-off to get a few more dollars out of the punters.

So he read my manuscripts and sat me down to lunch and talked me through the manuscripts. The first one I did was *The Dark Crystal*, which for some reason became huge in Japan, which I don't understand but it did. But it went to number three on the *New York Times'* bestseller list, but of course it wasn't my book really – it was my translation, as it were, into novel form of what Jim and his colleagues had done. Nevertheless it meant my name at number three on the *New York Times'* bestseller list, so I wasn't going to complain about that! And two years later, I had a phone call here from Jane Leventhal who headed up Henson Publishing, or whatever they were called, and she said, 'Anthony! Jim's making another film. This one's called *Labyrinth.* We've got David Bowie acting in it along with some of the puppets and we'd like you to do the book – would that be all right with you?' Yes, thank you. We talked through what it would entail – me going to New York for a few weeks – and then she said, 'Now let's see, I'm just checking my files. When you did *The Dark Crystal*, we paid $17,000. Does that sound the right kind of figure?' And I was thinking, yes, thank you very much, Jane. And she said, 'No, no hold on, let's make it $19,000.' And I don't know what prompted her! I think what must have prompted her is that I didn't say anything. She said $17,000 and I went silent in the wonder at the thought that all my financial problems for the next couple of years have just evaporated in one telephone call. So, I didn't say anything, just smiled quietly to myself and she probably thought I was going, 'Oh, $17,000, I'm not sure about that…' So that was my third big break.

Andrew: The final bit of this interview I wanted to talk to you about links to *Up the Feeder, Down the Mouth* and also other elements of your work, including the new novel which you've just published (*Only the Dance)*, is the rootedness of your work in Bristol. Whether it's the history of the docks then and right up to the present day with your new crime novel, which is set in Bristol. Bristol is really important to you, isn't it?

Anthony: Absolutely. It's a sort of sort of political thing really, Andrew. If I had to write in a box 'political affiliation', I think I'd write 'localist' now. Localist with a socialist tinge, but I think localism is part of socialism. I have real doubts nowadays, as I think many people do, about the possibility of running countries, certainly as big as Russia or the USA, but even the UK. We have a totally incompetent government at the moment, they can't manage it, but even the competent governments we've had, they've barely managed it. And I think local government, people being responsible for the way their own local city or town or village is run, is really the way forward, the only way that's going to work in the long run. And so that's enhanced the love that I have for Bristol, that a lot of people who live here have because it's a great place to live and in places very beautiful as well.

I could easily set it [my work] in Richmond on the Thames, where I grew up but there's no point because I don't belong there anymore and I don't know what goes on there nowadays. I know something of what goes on in Bristol and you need that stuff. And it's very interesting. Again, I think it's Hemingway who says something along these lines – when you know something and deliberately leave it out, that stimulates the audience imagination. When you leave something out because you don't know it, the audience sniff a rat and think he's not up to the mark. There's always a difference.

I won't say I know Bristol, that would be absurdly arrogant thing to say, but I've lived here 60 years now and I feel I know a good deal about the city, including its history which of course, is becoming, thanks to people like David Olusoga, more and more prominent in the minds of many, many people who live here.

Andrew: When I read the new novel – for which many congratulations, it's quite an achievement to write a book, let alone after writing so many and in your 80s and I take my metaphorical hat off to you – I appreciated the way you rooted it in Bristol, even to the explanations that one of the characters gives about why Whiteladies Road is called Whiteladies Road and why Blackboy Hill is called Blackboy Hill. I thought it was weaved in throughout in a good way.

Anthony: I heard Iris Murdoch give a talk in the Great Hall of the University [of Bristol], probably in 1960-something, and she said that whenever she started writing one of the many novels she wrote, she said she never really knew the story. What she did was she knew the characters, she knew the three or four people who were going to be prominent in this story, and she said, the other thing she needed to know was the location, the place where the story was going to happen. And I wrote the book like that really.

I knew the lead characters because I'd already used them in two previous thrillers, so they were old friends, I know how they think and talk. And the location, here it is, I live here … I wouldn't have dreamed of setting in anywhere else.

Andrew: And have you got plans for a fourth volume or a new novel, maybe?

Anthony: Maybe. Some writers finish a book and they already have the seed starting of the next one. That has happened to me in the past, but at the moment I don't know what… Well, I do know what comes next, just very soon. I've got a second pamphlet of poems coming out. Because I started as a poet, as so many of us did, and I've gone on writing some poetry now and then and Tom says he likes what I write and he's encouraged me to keep going. I think of him as Ezra Pound to my T S Eliot, or maybe the other way around. That is what comes next. But it's done. It's with the printer at the moment, so it'll be out soon.

After that, I really don't know. I've got three plays completed, waiting to be done. But the theatres are still trying to get over Covid. And the current regime at the Bristol Old Vic doesn't seem to have much time for what I've written in the past. But that's changing soon, they're getting a new director, and we'll see what happens then.

As for books, I like writing books very much, because you do it on your own at home. I haven't got an idea at the moment. But they're like dandelion seeds in May, when the wind's blowing and suddenly one lands on you. When I started this latest thriller, it was only when I finished the book when I said, 'Hold on, I've done what Iris Murdoch said to do.' But I'd forgotten what she'd told me.

I didn't know the plot. I just knew the people and the location, and that I wanted to write something about the cocaine racket. I know nothing about it, I've never seen a bag of cocaine in my life. But I

had a curiosity. I know that most people, if they've suddenly feel the need for cocaine, will go down some back street with a tenner and buy a bag. But you read about these parties, well, on telly and on film, you see these parties where very swish, well-off bankers, suddenly going [snorts] like that. And you think, 'Well, okay, I'm not going to do that.' But how do they get it? Who supplies it? Presumably the host at whatever party is going on has a source and he's not going down a back street, he must have some kind of wholesale supplier of some sort. So I came up with this probably very fanciful idea that you might be able to set up a mail order system for selling cocaine in bulk, with all sorts of safeguards, of course, to prevent the long arm reaching out and fingering your collar.

Andrew: Well, that book is out now from Tangent Books, and you can still get copies of Anthony's memoir, *Wordsmith*, from Redcliffe Press. Anthony, thank you so much for joining us. And I have to say that you know that *The Newcomers* is really important to us, not just in showing it but also in helping us learn about Bristol and we've used it many times in our work. But also thank you for the magical moments you've given us in theatre, including that wonderful night in 2001, down on the city docks, when I saw the opening night of *Up the Feeder, Down the Mouth*. It was a beautiful evening, and a magical series of moments. The best play I've seen in Bristol in all my time here. Thank you very much for all your work, Anthony, and thank you for joining us today.

Anthony: It's been a great pleasure, Andrew, and thank you.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.