

What Does Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* Teach Us About Building Great Cities?

Susie Alegre, Darran Anderson and Sian Norris

Chaired by Andrew Kelly

Andrew: Hello and welcome to Bristol Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly. One of the aims of our Festival of the Future City, which is back this October, is to look at cities of the past and cities of the imagination. Salman Rushdie's new book tells the stories of the legendary Indian city Vijayanagara or Bisnaga, Victory City, as it's more commonly known in the book, and the remarkable Pampa Kampana who provides the seeds for the city (literally), and sees its rise and fall over more than two centuries.

I've always been a supporter of freedom of thought and freedom of expression. I was in Bradford and saw *The Satanic Verses* being burned on the street. Seeing this strengthened what I believe in. And it was this belief and commitment that led me to set up Festival of Ideas 18 years ago. It was an honour, many years after this, to interview Salman on stage in Bristol in our festival. We hoped then that the relative freedom he enjoyed would continue. But the murder attempt showed the threat is always there. I very much hope that we will be able to welcome Salman Rushdie back to Bristol and we wish him well in his recovery.

To discuss *Victory City*, I'm joined by writer and commentator Sian Norris, whose *Bodies Under Siege: How the Far Right Attack on Reproductive Rights went Global* is out in June, barrister Susie Alegre, author of *Freedom to Think: Protecting a Fundamental Human Right in the Digital Age*, and Darran Anderson, whose books include *Imaginary Cities: A Tour of Dream Cities, Nightmare Cities, and Everywhere in Between*, and *Inventory: A Family Portrait of Derry's Troubled Past*. Both *Freedom to Think* and *Imaginary Cities* have featured as Books of the Year in the *Financial Times*.

Let's start with cities. The city at the heart of this book, Bisnaga, is in some ways an ideal city. It's based on a real and tolerant place in the southwest region of India. Sian, can I start with you? A woman literally

seeded the city. Her vision for the city is modern, no longer anti-art, against women, or hostile towards sexual diversity, and embracing poetry, liberty, and joy, as Rushdie writes. You've worked with us on women and cities. What did you take from this book?

Sian: I think that's one of the most interesting things. It's that idea of what could a city be? How can we imagine a city when it is designed for women and by women?

We've spoken a lot about this in Festival of the Future City. What do cities look like when they have women at their heart? We talk about issues like accessibility. Women's cities are often focussed more on how women make journeys around the place rather than thinking about a car that takes you from A to B. We think about journeys that might be on foot or on buses or on trains, or that accommodate women taking buggies or other caring responsibilities. And, of course, we also think about how a city designed for and by women would focus on protecting women from gender-based violence and harassment and the abuse that all women live with every day as they traverse the cities they live in.

I think one of the really interesting aspects of this novel is how, at the beginning, when she imagines the city, when she creates the city and seeds it, these are the values that she's taking forward with her. Obviously, we're not talking about buses and buggies. This is set in the very, very distant past. But thinking about what it would mean to live in a city that values creative qualities, that thinks about poetry and art and diversity and tolerance. And then what that means when that is taken away.

Much of the book seems to me almost a backlash against these kind of values of freedom, poetry, culture, creativity, nurturing. And this is a backlash that we're always seeing around the world when women gain some rights and women gain some status and women gain some freedoms. We see this regression against those freedoms. And it feels to me like the book is often a fight in the space of the city between what it means to be free, what it means to be a free woman or a free society, and what it means when those freedoms are taken away or repressed.

Andrew: We'll come back to some of these points throughout the discussion. Darran, this is based on a real city, but it's also a work of the imagination. How does this fit into the literature of imaginary cities?

Darran: I think by its very nature it's a unique proposition. And at the heart of this book is the question of autonomy for the citizens and the inventor of the city. But the uniqueness is interesting in itself. There's a wonderful scene at the beginning of the book where the city literally grows from these seeds. It's the magic realism. And from that wonderful organic beginning, you get the sense that this is a city of flux and change, and it really appeals to the power of those things, in good ways and bad ways. Nothing stays the same for very long. Everything's complex and layered and there's all these variables constantly happening.

So, in terms of its place and the literature of imaginary cities, it's uniquely amorphous in a way. It does have a certain overlap with books like Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Jan Morris's *Hav*. They have all these different themes that you move through - desire, mortality, memory, contingency, simultaneity, all these things. But at their heart there's this idea of getting back to the real. They're really about just one place, and that's often the place where in the case of Calvino, it's Venice. And, in the case of Jan Morris, it's probably all the different cities that she visited over a long career. There's always the sense of using the imaginary to tell the real. And very often, the real can't be told in direct terms, where there's a threat to that. So, I see this book as very much the style is the message, and the message is the style and vice versa.

Andrew: Two of the books which sprung to my mind as I read them, were the ones you've mentioned.

Darran: Absolutely. It's almost like in science fiction, you have this idea that the stories are about the future, but, really, they're always about the present. And I think in the case of Rushdie's, the fantastical is always a way of articulating the real. Also, another quality I like about it, the principle of uncertainty is really fascinating in this book, nothing is ever taken for granted. Everything is subject to change. And the moment that

they get a foothold for good or ill, it immediately starts. There's a dialectic, it immediately starts coming under pressure.

And the passage of time, obviously. The lead character lives for a long period of time and is subject to seeing all these layers, not just in spatial terms and time terms. And that's a quality that you don't find in a lot of literature about imaginary cities, that wide angle lens that he has. Also, it's a very personal tale. You definitely get the sense that this is a book that's come from the women of his life, and it's a testament to them and a testament to the women of India. But I get this impression, and I know from hearing some of his recent interviews, that it's a romantic tale of a North Indian looking at the south of India as this place that is simultaneously familiar but incredibly enchanting and alien. And that's something that, no matter where you are in the world, you can relate to. It's always there. The next door neighbour is always simultaneously hostile but fascinating at the same time.

Andrew: Susie, the city changes a lot in the book but at certain times it has a very strong tradition and commitment to tolerance. What lessons can we take from this book about the importance of tolerance in cities?

Susie: I think it's fascinating. One of the things that really struck me at the beginning of the book was this idea of Pampa Kampana effectively whispering to all of these newly seeded beings in her city this message of tolerance and creativity and art and feminism and equality. So, the idea that literally everyone in the city comes from this beginning and yet still it doesn't stay. Things change. Even she and her family have to leave. I think it's really interesting, though, that tolerance does come back, that these things come in waves and that it's not a question of giving up. It is a question of keeping the faith, if you like, but also that one person or one doctrine is never going to last forever. You're not going to be able to seed something that will be a continuum that will last forever.

And I think one of the things as well about the city and the way that the city develops is also how cities have neighbourhoods, which is quite different from if you grow up in a village, as I did and now living in London. One of the things I love about London is that London has so

many different characters in its different neighbourhoods and you see that as well in Bisnaga, which effectively then allows for tolerance because partly everyone's together, but also everyone can find their own people. You can find your community within the city, and I think that is really important. But as I say, this idea of the whispering, to begin with when I was reading it, I was thinking, 'Well, she's effectively brainwashing the entire city and where is this going to go?' And I think that in a way, what comes across is very much that idea that you can't do that, it's not going to last forever, but that you still shouldn't give up on promoting these ideas of tolerance and that is where our creativity and our human future essentially comes from.

Andrew: In your book, you've written about the tradition of freedom of thought going back to well beyond the time that we're talking about here. And there are lessons through history, aren't there?

Susie: Absolutely. I think one of the earliest examples that I gave was looking at Socrates, who famously was made to take his own life because his words, and his attempts to engage with the youth of Athens, were perceived as a threat to democracy. And even now there's an argument about whether or not he was effectively pushing fascism and intolerance or whether he was talking about freedom of thought. And the fact that he was put to death may well be one of the reasons why we're still talking about him today, which also shows the futility of trying to close down voices.

Another example that I used was J S Mill and his book *On Liberty*, where he talks about the fact that freedom of expression was much more heavily censored and restricted in continental Europe, in places like France, for example, where you're much more likely to be arrested for something you might have written or said, as Voltaire realised very quickly, but that in England the opprobrium and restrictions of society in Victorian society in particular, in Mill's view, where there was as much of a curtailment on freedom of thought and freedom of expression as those really quite draconian laws in other countries. And that's interesting from a human rights perspective, and particularly today, the situation of Salman Rushdie himself as a demonstration of this is that on the one

hand, when we look at freedom of expression from a human rights perspective, you may challenge laws that are hugely restrictive of freedom of expression, but there is also the big impact of the way society responds to expression, whether that is through the threat of violence, as Salman Rushdie has so tragically been exposed to, or whether it's just a negative feeling, an exclusion, and the fact that you won't be able to stay in your community if you continue to say what you're saying.

One of the things that I think is really important as well from a human rights perspective, and that I talked about in my work, is that freedom of expression as a human right does not protect hate speech. International human rights law instruments actively prohibit hate speech, tell governments that they need to bring in laws to prevent advocacy of war, advocacy of racial hatred. There are effectively these limits on that kind of speech, speech that undermines other people's rights, is not protected. And that's as well what we see in Bisnaga. The ideas of tolerance being lost are coming from the grass roots. While they may eventually tip over into the leadership and the governance of Bisnaga, there's something that swells up in the community and swells up again through preaching against tolerance.

Andrew: Sian - one thing we've seen in the last few months is how significant roles now in Bristol are employing women, whether that's the new vice chancellor at the University of Bristol, the bishop of Bristol, the high sheriff and so on. Do you think having these leadership positions will help change a city like Bristol?

Sian: I think there are many things that are really important to consider when we think about women in leadership roles and they're what I used to call feminist bodies versus feminist minds. It's absolutely imperative that we have what we call symbolic representation. And this is when we see women in really high powered roles. If we're going to work within the systems that we have today and the way that power structures are created today, it's really important that we see that women can occupy spaces of power, that can occupy spaces of influence – for girls growing up to see that a woman can be prime minister, can be president, can be a high ranking surgeon, can be a bishop - it's not that long ago that women

weren't allowed to be bishops at all. So symbolic representation is really important because we can't be what we can't see as the saying goes. For real change to happen, we need what's called substantive representation. And this is when women occupy spaces of power that actually create change for other women and for society as a whole.

There's always these big arguments like, does real change happen if you have a bad women in power? Well, actually, I think there's lots of bad men in power. We'll know we have equality when women can be as bad as a mediocre white man. But you do need to recognise that if we're going to achieve real change for women in society, we need to have women in places of power that are actively advocating for women's equality and women's liberation. And I think, again, this is something that's been interesting in a mainstreaming of feminism over the past couple of decades. When we look at the 1997 Labour women intake, which was absolutely transformative in terms of women's political power, the number of women in Parliament doubled overnight on the 1st of May, and a lot of those women would not call themselves feminists because at that time 'feminism' was still seen as a bit of a dirty word. There was a '90s backlash. But those women went into spaces in Parliament, they went into the ministries, and they acted and created policies that promoted women's equality. For the first time you had women in the transport ministry and that meant focus was on buses rather than just roads. You had women in business departments, and they were creating policies around childcare. Even the fact that one of the bars in Parliament was turned into a creche because suddenly women needed spaces where their children could be looked after.

Nowadays, we have women who are much more comfortable in parliament calling themselves feminists because of this revival of feminism and much more open minded look at women's politics, and yet they're not enacting those feminist policies. So, this is where we have feminist bodies in the room, but not necessarily feminist minds.

In terms of Bristol, it's absolutely fantastic that we see these women in positions of power. And it's really important that girls growing up in Bristol can look around and say, 'Yes, I can occupy these spaces'. But if

we're to see real substantive change for women in Bristol, we need to have these feminist minds in these positions of power. We need them to be enacting policies that actually support and help women.

I think the other issue to consider is where exactly does power still lie? We can have these prominent women, but if they're what we call the Smurfette syndrome - the only women in a room full of men and aren't actually getting listened to, aren't getting their voices across, aren't getting these policies across - then, again, we don't really see substantive change for women. And like everywhere at the moment, Bristol is a city that's facing multiple problems around economic equality, around safety, issues around health care and equality outcomes. And all of this is the result of ten, 12 years of austerity policies and this eroding of women's economic equality and women's safety that is a result of austerity. It's really important now, more than ever, that we have strong female leadership that isn't just saying 'I exist as a women, therefore I'm changing things for women'; it is actually creating substantive changes that mean women can achieve their potential and achieve equality and liberation ultimately.

Andrew: Darran - one of the themes in our Festival for the Future City in October is cities coming out of war and crisis. And in the book *Bisnaga* goes through a lot of war and crisis. You've written about this in your own work, particularly about Derry. What lessons do you have for cities coming out of conflict and crises, both on what you might have learned from this book, but also your own life and work?

Darran: The message that comes out of this book for me correlates with my own work, in terms of the resistance to the singular, the resistance to the people of one book. There's a plurality of stories all through Rushdie's work, a multiplicity of angles and perspectives and voices and that's incredibly important. But it needs to be real. We tend to have mantras now about diversity and stuff, but actually living that can be more chaotic and messy than some people are ready for, and delving into the messiness is vitally important and is something that this book does very well.

I think it's a very sophisticated book in a lot of ways. It begins with an incredible act of violence with the suttee ritual, where women were compelled to throw themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands and their superiors supposedly in society. And the book isn't bound by that, the characters aren't bound by that. It's something that they defy by ignoring and building and creating their own autonomy. It begins from a very violent or politicised act of repression, but something emerges from it that is constructive, and I think there's something very complex and sophisticated going in Rushdie's thinking - he's not reactionary, even in a progressive sense. There aren't these blank condemnations. He's much more subtle than that. He's much more complex. He's much more of a writer than that. It's not a prolonged act of activism.

It's a story, first and foremost, and he's first and foremost a storyteller and has always said that. With the actual act of suttee, the British Empire came in and one of the ways that it appeared civilised was that it would ban these uncivilised practices. By default, they look like the civilising force when in fact they were coming into extract resources and repress the population. There's elements of what you would call anti-colonial or post-colonial all through Rushdie's work and especially in this book, you touch on it with the bastardisation even of the name into Bisnaga. He's always twisting things. There's always a little quirk there. Pampa actually likes the bastardisation of the name because it's messy, because it's an accident, because it's tangential, because ultimately it resists the singular.

Rushdie defies throughout his work the British imperial amnesia or the apologies that you tend to find, that there was some kind of golden age back then. And we were being entranced and whatever. He equally resists the BJP and the nationalist approach, which simultaneously is singular as well. He's looking for the plurality. And my experience, growing up in a city that was divided, that had conflict and division just absolutely permeated every single aspect of it, the way that you naturally resisted it. It wasn't even a political polemic thing. It wasn't even a decision, really. It was just your natural impulse was to create spaces that defied that, create spaces that were different. And we literally did that in the space. When we were teenagers, we went up to rooftops because that was one place that you couldn't be found by the RUC or the Army or the IRA or

whoever. And you find these zones, autonomous spaces, and it doesn't even need to be political. It's just innate. It's just innate in human beings. If you can encourage them in a political way, if you can find those spaces and expand them and develop them, then that's fantastic. But it's an innate human desire to resist the singular.

Andrew: Susie, one of the themes of the book is the idea of refuge. Some cities are known for being places of refuge, both in the United States and here, for example, with cities of sanctuary. Tell us about the importance of refuge in the book.

Susie: I thought it was really interesting that there's a chunk of the book where Pampa Kampana who'd effectively created this city, given it life, imbued it with all her ideals, that she and her daughters have to leave. Essentially, it's a battle for succession, a battle between her daughters and her sons as to who should be taking over in the city. They withdraw very fast to a forest where they then spend decades in effective suspended animation. Sometimes you can't stand and fight, sometimes you have to withdraw and regroup and find the space to protect yourself in order to be able to come back.

Pampa Kampana has her two-and-a-half centuries of life. And so, she's able to withdraw for a very long time and come back at a more auspicious moment, with a cloak of magic about her, arriving back in bird form, which then also makes her more acceptable. But I think one of the things that's interesting about this forest is that while it's a refuge from the passage of time, in some ways, there's also a whole lot going on in the background that we don't see much detail about. There's a huge battle with the pink monkeys and there's a group of women in the forest who are living a purely feminist existence, having escaped from other places where women were less well treated.

And I think it's fascinating, this idea that you're getting out of the city, going and sitting in this forest in suspended animation. But it really does underline the importance of refuge and the fact that there are points where you can't stand and keep going with your message, you either have to shut down or you have to get out and find refuge. And that's clearly a

very important point and it's something that we see as well in the debates around human rights in this country and other countries. Refugees, asylum seekers are often at the sharp end of political narratives pushing back on human rights. And what we see in this book is how vital refuge is and whether you say it's cities of refuge, but also providing safe access to people who are defending human rights, safe access to people who are using their freedom of expression.

Writers, journalists, human rights defenders are often the people who are most acutely in need of refuge, because often when we see circumstances where societies are becoming extremely intolerant, the first thing that will be clamped down on is freedom of expression, because freedom of expression allows people to question authority. It allows people to engage in discussion. And when tolerance is fading, those in power don't want to be questioned and they don't want to be engaging in informed debate. Refuge is really important, both from the perspective of keeping freedom of expression, but also from keeping the memory and being able to come back and say what really happened in a space and to contribute to the future building of the city.

Andrew: I'm going to come back to memory and writing history in a moment. Sian, Bisnaga has a great tradition of tolerant times of arts and culture and poetry. You've run festivals in Bristol. How important are arts and culture to cities? The more I read, for example, of cities coming out of the pandemic, the more reliance is being placed on regenerating and renewing downtown areas in the United States, for example, with new arts and entertainment facilities.

Sian: It's fundamental. One of the things that makes living in a city worthwhile when you're living opposite a massive building site, as I am now and it's certainly noisy, is that you can tap into this great cultural heritage and that you can explore ideas. People come to cities to build cultural entities, theatres or cinemas or museums or create art exhibitions. They're places of artistic community where people can find like-minded people and explore ideas and explore creative outlets. But it also taps really into what Susie was saying. The reason we need these cultural spaces, we need cultural festivals, we need museums, we need

galleries, we need gig venues, is to promote that freedom of expression. Cities can be centres of debate, of ideas, of idea making.

When we start to shut down those spaces, when we try and restrict our cultural heritage or try and close down voices or close down spaces where people can think and share ideas and discuss and debate, we're in real trouble. One of the difficult things that many of us found living in lockdown was being cut off from cultural spaces, was not being able to congregate with people, to share ideas and thoughts, being confined to our homes and our rooms and not having that openness of access to creativity and access to thinking. And it's interesting that coming out of the pandemic, on the one hand there's this real urge to get into these spaces, festivals are reviving. Every festival I've been to since the pandemic has been really buzzy and this great relief that we're all together again, but also that culture is again in the firing line from various governments. We're seeing swingeing cuts to cultural institutions and to festivals and to museums.

The impact of the cost of living crisis on various cultural venues is significant and yet underreported. Last year I looked at the impact on museums, for example, which are seeing massive energy bills and problems in terms of making their budgets fit while also losing out on funding that could have kept them afloat. I do think that while there are probably economic reasons for these cuts, they fit into an attack on cultural freedom and freedom of expression that we're seeing much more widely. And we really need to treasure our cultural institutions and treasure these spaces, be that an artists' collective that's formed out of a squat or a massive art gallery that's a national, international institution. They all come from the same roots of wanting to use cities and communities to foster debate, to foster speech, and to have that freedom to explore and discover new ideas.

One of the big issues that we've seen over the last decade is the closure of libraries. I remember as a teenager going to the library every week, and the books I read then have had a profound influence on my life, in my thinking. So, when we see these attacks on these spaces, we have to ask what's really being attacked? And I think there is this real problem that

we have in wanting to repress speech and wanting to repress freedom of expression. And obviously that's something we need to fight back against.

Andrew: Darran, you mentioned earlier about Salman Rushdie's use of magical realism and mythology in his work. How does this come through in *Victory City* for you?

Darran: There's an interesting aspect to magic realism. It's a little bit like noir. Noir films and literature tend to happen in places where there's divisions and people adopt shifting identities as a means of survival. And magic realism tends to succeed best, or has done historically, in places that have had one overarching ideology that's dominated a stifled and orthodox authoritarianism. It becomes a way of resistance. South American magic realism, Eastern European magic realism tends to happen in places where there's an inability to tell the truth, because the truth will be severely punished. In a way like we were talking earlier about sanctuary, language itself becomes a sanctuary and mythology. You can smuggle ideas and concepts and even the idea of freedom itself, almost like a Trojan horse, in these magical packages. And Rushdie, since *Midnight's Children* at least, has had a wonderful grasp of both mythological and the flux of that and the protean aspect of that, the way it can shape shift as a way of transcending the binaries of politics and that stifling nature of ideology. It's a very effective tool and it's a very underused tool. He's a master at it. After he was attacked, I came back to the speech that he made, I think, at Columbia. And he said, I'll quote him directly:

‘Obviously, a rigid, blinkered, absolutist worldview is the easiest to keep hold of, whereas the fluid uncertain metamorphic picture I've always carried about is rather more vulnerable. Yet I must cling with all my might to... my own soul; must hold on to its mischievous, iconoclastic, out-of-step clown-instincts, no matter how great the storm, and if that plunges me into contradiction and paradox, so be it. I've lived in that messy ocean all my life. I fished in it for my art. This turbulent sea was the sea outside my bedroom window in Bombay. It is the sea in which I was born and which I carry within me wherever I go.’

I kept coming back to that passage and the joyful defiance of it, and I've heard it since then. He did an interview recently, and I think it was in the *New Yorker* podcast. And just the humour in the face of this barbarity and the savagery of the attack and the cynicism of its apologists, the fact that he wasn't self-pitying, he wasn't calling for vengeance. There was just this humour, instantly this defiant humour. It's that spirit that is encapsulated in this book, is encapsulated in the best of Rushdie's writing, and it's something that is encapsulated in magic realism. It tends to happen in places where it's not easy to speak the truth. You have to find other means, other ways through the wall, whether it's breaches or Trojan horses or whatever it might be.

Andrew: Susie, in the book various travellers come to Bisnaga and influence the place in many different ways and these are based on real people and real accounts of the time. What role did they play for you?

Susie: One of the things I thought was fascinating was the love interests in the book, such as there are any, are all foreigners effectively. Pampa Kampana's love of her life is a series of interchangeable Italian and Portuguese visitors to the city. In fact, the first of those seems to be the father of her daughters.

One of the things that I thought was interesting in the discussion about succession was that it was pitched as the girls against the boys. But one of the other aspects of those children of potential succession is that all the girls were potentially fathered by a foreigner who was Pampa Kampana's love. So, there is this interesting question of tolerance, where at the beginning of the book she keeps her foreign lover while also being married to the king. But when it comes to succession, clearly that's a very different matter. And we see later on as well one of her daughters who is drawn by the lure of travel and who disappears with a Chinese traveller. And you see that these travellers do have a profound impact, but they also in some ways tread lightly on the city of Bisnaga. They have very personal impact on Pampa Kampana and on her family.

But it's also interesting that there's a foreigners' neighbourhood in Bisnaga, so they're very separate, while they're also very much accepted by her. And I thought that idea as well of travel, of maps and when we see her great, great, great granddaughter returning, who's absolutely driven by this idea of travel and who draws the maps that she has heard throughout her life and through her family history when she eventually returns to Bisnaga. And so we see this idea that a city can't be standing on its own. No man is an island, no city is an island, if you like, and that you need the external influences throughout your history in order for a society to grow. But also flouting the problematic nature of that.

I think particularly in this book, it's the women who are bringing in foreign men and there's some challenges that that then raises, there's some casual racism at the later end of the book in relation to that. But the challenge, as I say, about succession and rulership in the city, which I thought was very interesting, the way that was a thread through the book, but also not an entirely prominent and necessarily explained thread through the book.

Andrew: Sian, can I ask you about storytelling and the writing of history? At the beginning of Bisnaga, Pampa Kampana literally makes the city from seeds, and makes up the stories of the people who live there, gives them a history, and then they develop and get their own histories. And later on, Rushdie writes that history is the consequence not only of people's actions, but also of their forgetfulness. It's about people understanding that place where they've come from, their history, but also what they forget as well as what they remember.

Sian: Absolutely. And this is a really on-topic point that we're seeing in terms of who gets to write history at the moment. And who gets to forget and who's entitled to certain narratives. The first thing I wanted to say about the storytelling aspect is, as you say, Pampa Kampana whispers these narratives into people's minds, that become their memories. And that's how the history of the city is built almost from a moment.

I think one of the joys of living in a city is that when you are in a city, you're not really there for the buildings or the roads. It's the histories, it's

the hidden stories that occupies all of those spaces. It's when you walk past a pub and it's like, 'Oh, that's the pub that Marx was drinking in before he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*'. You walk through Bristol, and you go past the house that was in the David Olusoga show – *A House Through Time* - and you remember all of the stories that were nurtured and created in that house.

Yes, cities are buildings, they're plans, they're maps, they're roads, they're pavements, but they're also the stories of the people that have inhabited them. And one of the joys of living in a city is discovering these stories and finding those surprising things, seeing that odd blue plaque or that odd little plaque that isn't an official blue plaque at all but that someone has just put there, or the Spanish Civil War Memorial in Castle Park - I must have lived in Bristol for probably 25 years before I even spotted that.

Suddenly all of these narratives arrive in your mind. And this act of imagination when you try and think about what it was like to live in that time and to be the people that went off to war and are remembered in this way. But the other aspect to that is who gets to control these stories and who gets to forget. One of the big debates that we're having around history at the moment, and particularly the history of cities, is around race, empire, of the enslavement of people, and this absolute desire by some people - and the right of politics - to say that there is only one version of history, and we have to forget the other versions. And that version is of British supremacy, that the Empire may have done some bad things but was probably good because we built the roads, and that we shouldn't be focusing on the negatives, or we shouldn't be focusing on the harms that people did. We should just be focusing on the great narrative and that is an incredible act of forgetting, it is an absolute deliberate act of forgetting. To say that there is only one version of events that we must all adhere to and to not adhere to that is somehow unpatriotic or is somehow a betrayal of British values.

What's been really interesting is that the resistance to that is an act of remembrance. It's remembering that there are alternative narratives. It's remembering the harms that were done, it's recognising that things are

complicated, and that people were hurt, and people are oppressed, and people are exploited in order to create this one grand narrative of history. It really goes back to that quote that Darran said earlier from Rushdie. There can be this singular narrative that we all adhere to and there can be the multifaceted, the messiness, the choppy waters of stories that we have to explore, and we have to examine, and we have to be honest about.

The final thing that I wanted to say is that with this insistence on the one narrative of history, there is a contradiction at its heart because it's the criticism coming from that one narrative's voice is that it's the opposition that is causing the problem, that is forgetting the good and only focusing on the bad. It's the complete opposite of that. There's a refusal to recognise the complexity of stories, the complexity of history and the diversity of stories and experiences. And that's the act of forgetting, not the decision to amplify those stories, to amplify those narratives and amplify that diversity. And I think when Kampana whispers those stories, it's like, who gets to decide what history looks like, who gets to tell the stories, and how do they change and how do they evolve, and who gets to forget and who gets to be amplified?

Andrew: Another theme in Festival of the Future City, which is following a number of years of work on this, is about how cities remember the past and how they use that past to understand where they are now, but also create a better future.

Quick question for Darran and Susie, Sian talked a bit there about what she likes about being in cities. What would you say? I'll start with you, Darran.

Darran: Very similar actually, the exploration quality to it. The familiar often conceals the extraordinary. Once you start digging anywhere. I like going to places that are off the beaten track and where there appears to be no history and invariably anywhere human beings have spent time you just dig and it's there, like literally, geographically, or topographically, you'll find nettles grow where there used to be ruins, when the river has a drought, things start to appear. I like going off the beaten track and

finding places in London. I live in London now, and it's just been an endless excavation of place. And those are all tied to people and often layers of people, layers of time. It's that idea of the strata, just digging in and it makes life interesting.

We tend to fall into dull routines of work and profit and commerce and all the rest. And they have a stalling effect on life. And one of the ways of reviving is to be able to walk around when you're familiar with the route. I commute to Soho every day and it's easy to just fall in, packed like sardines in a can in the tube and sent off in the morning. But I force myself at lunchtime to go off and take the side streets and the things you find there and the people you find there very often change the way you see the place. You think you know a place until you start digging.

Andrew: It's a wonderful place to explore, I love exploring that area. Susie, what about you?

Susie: I love the diversity, to be honest. I grew up on a farm outside a small village on a small island, and now I'm a Londoner. And I think like most Londoners, I've adopted the city because I love it, because I love being in the city. I also love the countryside. I never thought I would move to London. I was quite allergic to the idea of moving to London because I had this idea of this massive metropolis that you just get lost in. And I remember going on the tube and hearing so many different languages and seeing so many different people, so many different outfits. You're in so many different worlds just going five stops on the London Underground that I felt quite exhausted, having always lived in quite small cities and small villages. But suddenly, once I got over that initial shock of the barrage of information that you get when you arrive in London, it's something I enormously miss whenever I'm out of London, and which always brings me back to such a cosmopolitan city. I love the cosmopolitan nature, but also that trail through history, as you're saying, the fact that you've got an absolute clash of modernity and history and you can be seeing the most cutting edge architecture in the city of London and walk around the corner and be plunged back into Georgian Britain and get memories of the people that lived there in the past. For

me, it's the cosmopolitanism, it's the diversity, it's the fact that whoever you are, you can find your people in a city like London.

Andrew: One final quick question to you all. Do you have anything more you'd like to say about Salman's work?

Sian: It's important at this time where we are seeing this backlash against freedoms and fundamental freedoms, to really value the storytellers who push against that and who demand that voices and diversity of voices are formed. My work is focussed on the far right and the absolute repression of freedom of speech that the far right demands in all sorts of ways while defending that repression as an act of freedom of speech. They argue that their speech is being repressed by the left illiberal luvvies like me, or that their freedoms to hate, their freedoms to be harmful, are being repressed. And we need to absolutely champion what we mean by freedom of speech, what freedom of speech has the power to do and to change. And a writer like Salman Rushdie does that. We can't let these regressive forces co-opt that message and co-opt that freedom in order to push a hateful agenda. We absolutely have to celebrate those who are fighting for what it means and fighting for those greater freedoms for all of us.

Andrew: Susie?

Susie: I'd just like to say thank you for the work. And for me, it's been something that's gone with me through my life. I remember *The Satanic Verses* coming out - I think that was the first Rushdie novel that I read - and just being blown away with the richness of the worlds that he creates. And having read him throughout my life, it's wonderful to read *Victory City*, to have the opportunity to take part in this conversation, particularly at such a difficult time. And I'd like to thank him for his bravery in keeping going, that he's still creating, that he's still laughing and that he's still producing these fabulous books that we can enjoy.

Andrew: Darran?

Darran: I think there can be a pious quality to books. And anybody who's spent any time in the publishing industry knows that it can be as dishonourable as any industry, really. But I feel like Rushdie, with his bravery and his imagination and the defiance of his joy honours books again, and it needs honouring periodically and he really does that. I think it's Ursula Le Guin who said that the land outlives the empire, and with Rushdie I get the feeling that it's the story outlives the tyrant. He's living proof of that.

Andrew: *Victory City* is published by Jonathan Cape and it's out now. Thank you very much, Sian, Darran and Susie for joining me today.

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