

Maria Leaf—the sixth interviewee in my [chain interview experiment](#)



Maria was introduced by my fifth interviewee, [Susan Wokoma](#) who said: “I’d like to suggest my dear friend Maria Leaf who is a secondary school drama teacher but on the cusp of making some big changes in her career. She’s amazing and the reason I’m an actor today.”

I met up with Maria in the cafe at Foyles bookshop in Charing Cross Road. She told me about her drama teaching, her motivations and her mid-life adventure.

How did you come to choose a life in drama, Maria?

I was an only child and grew up in Leeds. I came from a very working class background and was quite shy but when I was at middle school I discovered that I had a big voice and liked being funny. Then at high school I had a part in a costume drama and tried to speak with a standard BBC accent. Glenda Jackson was on TV at the time playing Queen Elizabeth and there were these gorgeous Northern mums who came to the play and said “You sound just like Glenda Jackson.” I liked that. I discovered stories through doing drama and they helped me to find my voice and feel powerful, so I decided that I wanted to be an actress. I knew, too, that drama would give me something I could use. I couldn’t quite articulate what it was but I had a sense of responsibility to give something back. That came from my upbringing.



Photo: Glenda Jackson by Studio Publicity.

Later, when I was thinking about university, I knew that I wanted to come to London. As a child I’d read a lot of books that were set here and it seemed like you could disappear and be anything you wanted to be. I loved being in Leeds but I felt that I didn’t belong. If I’d stayed then I would have had to keep within the norm. But I was the first person in my family to go to university and I suppose it gave me the ability to change things. I particularly liked the mix of people at Goldsmiths. They were from all different classes and there was a lot happening there politically so that’s where I went. Because I’d grown up in the seventies I think I longed for a Ken Loach experience. There was an occupation going on—I can’t even remember what it was about but I loved the idea of it.

What happened after you graduated?

Most people say that they fall into drama teaching and that’s certainly what happened to me. I’d done some education projects and liked them, but then at the end of my degree I discovered I was having my son. And this was probably was the biggest wake-up call and inspiration I could have had.

From then on I had to take him into account but I was excited when I heard about a postgraduate course in performance that was being run by English National Opera. I was able to do that because it was in the evening. So I went along three times a week and met fantastic people. There was lots of money for projects like that then and they trained me up to become a workshop facilitator, or *animateur* as it was rather pretentiously known. I’d be sent out with an opera singer and we’d work in schools and with community groups to put on an opera. And through the people I met and the skills I learned, I discovered that I loved facilitating.

What did you love about it?

It wasn't the opera. I'd had no experience of that when I was growing up. I didn't love opera before I did the course and by the end of it I still didn't. But it was a way of developing as a performer and



I saw how it could reach out to kids. All those traditional stories are just variations on a theme. Whether it's the tragedies, the farce or the iconic characters, you can find ways to relate them to your life. One key moment was doing Orpheus and Euridyce with a group of kids from Bermondsey. We ran through fields in South East London and I remember thinking that this was an amazing experience and that something of it might stay with them. The workshops led to me teaching at a Saturday school and gradually the performances became less opera-focused. By then I knew that I really liked making theatre with young people and that there was a purpose to it. I started to meet kids where I thought, "I know your story—it's not my story but I understand it and can see how drama can help you make a difference like I feel it helps me make a difference." Our culture now is very prescriptive so it's important that kids get the chance to express themselves. Some of the kids that come on a Saturday are not the high fliers or the ones that get picked for the school play but our sessions

put them on a level playing field and they share experiences. It's a space that's theirs. And it's two-way—often they tell me about the books they're reading. It's that constant cycle of sharing that we're all going through all the time.

After a while of doing that I ended up working at St Bonaventure School in Stratford and it changed my life in lots of ways. The head was Sir Michael Wilshaw who went on to become head of OFSTED. There was real quality right across that school. The boys were joined together as a community, almost like a brotherhood—there was such empathy between them. I saw something in their work that was quite humbling. Opera was outside their experience but they just embraced it because they trusted one another and they were kind and generous. I felt there was something very special happening there. And when I look back on the nineties it seems like more of a golden time in schools. Nowadays everything is very controlled. You get given less time and teachers often ask you to link your work to the curriculum. It affects what you can do creatively. There's a lot less freedom.

I've also spent some years teaching GCSE and A-Level drama in an independent school. I've done all sorts of different things. Sometimes I've done workshops and people have asked me to go back and do some other work. And that's how it's progressed—one thing leading on to another.

What have been your influences?

Something that really influenced me was working as a hospital cleaner in Leeds. It was a summer job and I've never forgotten the women that I worked with. They'd start cleaning the university at 5am, then they'd come and clean the hospital and then they'd go and clean the local bingo hall. They were strong and brave. I was rubbish at cleaning but they were so kind to me. They went on strike for better pay but they still continued to have integrity in doing their job. I've been very lucky in the work I've done in schools but the memory of those women has stayed with me, and reminds me that I want to make a difference to people who don't have a voice.



But I suppose that my son is my main inspiration. He's studying languages and is now in his last year at university. And as he's nearing the age that I was when I had him, I think he recognizes that I might not have gone down the teaching route if I hadn't had him when I did. I don't see these things as sacrifices but he says "Come on Mum, it's time for you now." He's really keen for me to be brave. I feel a commitment to him because of that belief. And also because of the kids I've taught, like Susan. You're continually telling them to go out into the world and be brave—to take a journey and have their Laurie Lee moment. Some of the kids I've taught have come back to help me as facilitators. One is a girl who trained at Central School of Speech and Drama and she's way beyond me now. It's lovely to see this as you get older. But in my forties I feel that I should be moving forwards myself and that I need a kick. There's nothing worse than when someone you've taught asks, "Are you still there?"

For a long time I've been teaching GCSE and A-level and that's paid the bills and brought my son up. But now I'm at a point where I'm thinking "OK Maria, you need to do something different". I'm getting those emotional, weepy feelings that everyone says you get in your forties. "Who am I? How have I changed from when I started out? Perhaps my skills aren't what I thought they were..."

So what are you going to doing next?

I'm about to start a master's degree. I thought about doing something drama-related but instead I decided to do Children's Literature at Goldsmiths where I started. I've come full circle. I feel like Goldsmiths looked after me when I moved to London and now I'm going back there to be nourished again. I need to learn how to learn again, and to be challenged.

Why children's literature?

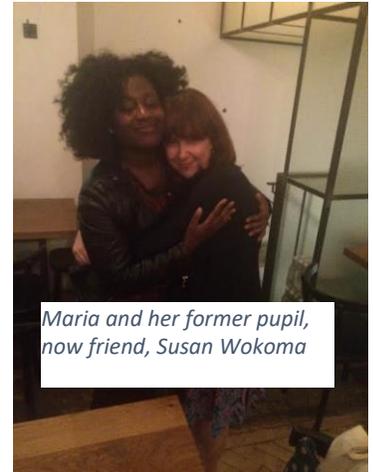
I really admire the course leader, Michael Rosen and the work he does in education. And a child's imagination is where it all starts. As an only child, I'd take out four books a day from the local library—things like Joan Aitken, and *The Little House on the Prairie* books. But it's interesting that people are quite confused when I say I'm not doing it to become a children's writer or anything else in particular. I love the idea of the people I'll meet and what we'll share but I don't necessarily see it going anywhere or that it will make me a better teacher. Mostly it's an indulgence and an adventure. I'm even enjoying thinking about the journey to get to New Cross from North London a few evenings a week. One thing is that I haven't been overzealous with the reading list and preparation. I'm just going to go and be open and see what happens—it feels exciting to do that. And it's an environment that I know. I think as you get older that you become more aware that you're alone and it's all down to you. That's probably why I chose to go back to Goldsmiths as I feel safe there. It's a mad, bonkers place but it's great.



Photo: Michael Rosen by Historyworks

Did you always know that you wanted to study children's literature?

No not at all. Originally I wanted to act, but now I realise that it wouldn't have worked out. Acting is so hard and I don't think that I had what Susan's got, which is a lucky star- it's about being in the right place at the right time. It's possible that I have it now, but back then I'd have wasted a lot of time. With hindsight I can see that my son was the right thing for that time. If I hadn't had him I would have sat around not really doing anything, with my head up my backside. As it happened his father and I had lots of out of work friends who'd just graduated, and they helped to bring him up. There were the usual struggles but with a lot of my jobs I could take my son with me. It just kind of worked out. He inadvertently led me into the field of work I was meant to go to and young people have never failed to inspire and support me. Watching a group of young women produce an event for a charity 'Justice for Care' was a recent humbling moment in my career. It was called 'You Can't Arrest an Idea'. And along with colleagues I've met, I wouldn't be who I am if it wasn't for my son and the students I've worked with. This has turned out to be the most fantastic journey and I wouldn't change any of it.



Maria and her former pupil, now friend, Susan Wokoma

And who are you going to pass me onto, Maria, as the next link in the chain?

I've chosen my friend Helen Jackson who is a nurse in Leeds. There are several reasons. I think back to the time when I was growing up. She was the friend I sat next to and she would say, "Yes of course you can do drama—of course you can be an actress". And also because of her commitment to the NHS, especially in the present climate. She has just powered on in the face of adversity.