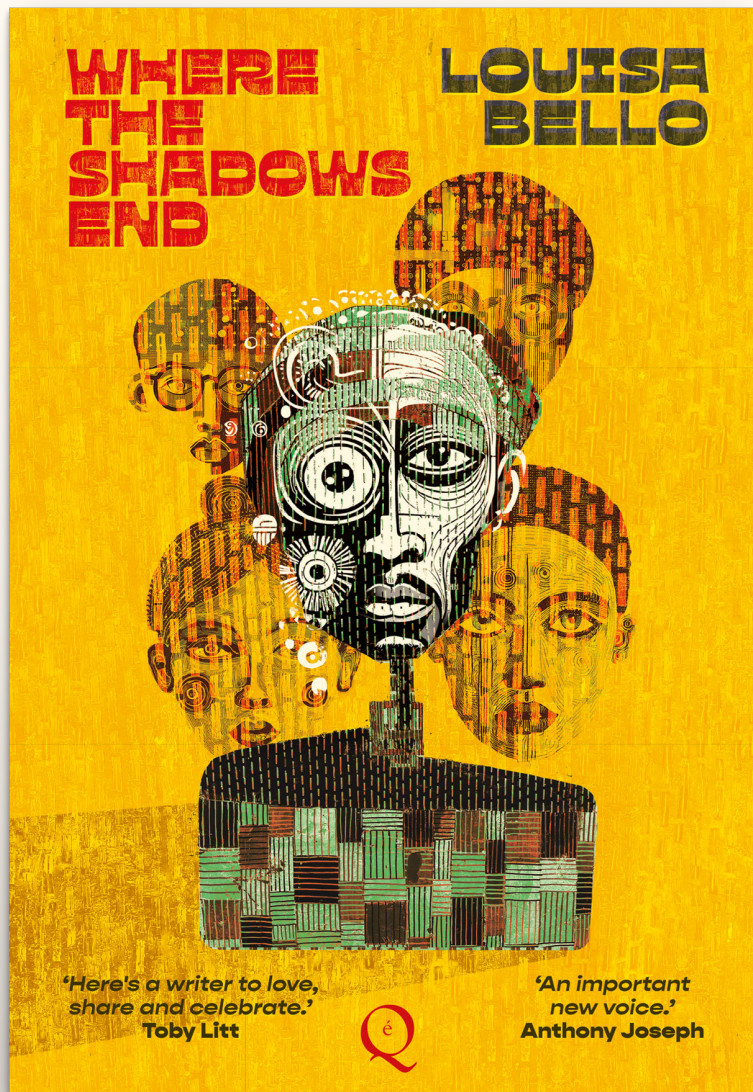


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BOOK CLUB AUTHOR Q&A WHERE THE SHADOWS END BY LOUISA BELLO



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Please see detailed below some questions and answers provided by the author in relation to their book.

1. Tell us in your own words about *Where The Shadows End*.

Where the Shadows End is my friend Sam's story, his journey, using his own beautiful, sometimes terrifying mind to guide him towards forgiving himself for the long-held, misplaced guilt over the death of his mother, a mind that also happens to hear and see voices which others can't. And those voices can be friends or foes or even a nemesis.

2. What inspired you to write the book? Was there an initial story idea or character?

I've been surrounded by voice hearers throughout my life - within my family, my friendships, and past relationships. I've also met many people who have experienced forms of auditory and visual hallucinations at different moments in their lives, whether through grief, illness, or even chemical experimentation in their youth. What struck me most was that no two experiences were ever the same though everyone agrees there's more to the mind than we know and there's more to this universe than we know. Every person's relationship with their voices was unique. People who live with voices - whether clinically diagnosed or not, and many are neither diagnosed nor wish to be - can experience auditory and visual hallucinations that are sometimes frightening and deeply disruptive but I have always been very aware of how heavily voice hearers are demonised in the media. Through research and conversation, I discovered a far broader reality - voices can be supportive, kind, humorous, challenging, or complex - as individual as the people who hear them. During a writing exercise, I wrote a short piece off the cuff, and the character of Sam simply appeared on the page. Around the same time, I'd watched the documentary *Crazywise*, which explores how voice hearing is understood very differently across cultures around the world. I think Sam emerged as my mind's way of asking questions about how we define, interpret, and respond to voice hearing in our world.

3. How did you find the experience of writing the book? Did it come quickly? Did you have a routine?

No, no and thrice no! It was messy, to say the least! My wonderful short story module lecturer at Birkbeck, the fabulously talented Jonathan Kemp, suggested

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I turn an exercise piece into a short story, which I did. It was then published in our end-of-year anthology and I got a First. An agent read it and asked to work with me to turn it into a novel, helped me apply for a Time to Write Grant, and I wrote the first draft. The agent left the agency, trauma and lockdown came, and I redrafted the first five chapters for an MA. I got a Distinction for that, was longlisted for the Pat Kavanagh prize, and continued drafting and redrafting until I was happy it was finished. I then spent many months sending it to a million publishers and agents and realised it couldn't be finished when Epoque Press expressed interest in Sam's voice and journey, and we worked together until deciding it was actually really finished this time! Although I'm still not 100% lol.

4. Why did you choose to set the book in London?

I'm a Londoner, born and bred. I've lived all around the world, Ecuador, China, Australia, Holland, Italy, but London is my home. It is also the cause and effect of endless trauma for many, especially working-class folk, even more especially black working-class folk. And so, this is where Sam had to be born. Trauma grows in dark, cold places. And sometimes that can also be Home for many and manifests into inter-generational trauma bonding. I've seen it over and over and it causes all sorts of mental trauma in adults. Not knowing where you come from can also be traumatic. I've seen the self-doubt the unknown causes adopted white friends, and I thought, imagine being brown, and not knowing where you are from, how might it affect a person?

5. There is a strong sense of community spirit running through the book. The scene where Sam saves Mr Behram from the rioters, for instance, the café and Mr Bademosi's bookshop both being places of communal gathering and safety. What did you want the book to say about community?

I've often found community without realising I even had it. Those people we see every day when you live in an area for an extended period of time - these people all have a perception of you, might even know you better than you know yourself, because of that unique, narrow perception. They might know things about you you don't even know about yourself. Like the bus driver who asked about my dog despite me never having her with me when I got on the bus to work in the mornings. When I asked him how he knew, he said I seemed like a dog lover because I was kind to everyone (I secretly thought it might have been the dog hairs on my clothes!). It got me to thinking about isolation and loneliness,

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and what would happen if more people realised they have more friends and community than they realise - might they reach out? Feel more supported? Community changes society for the better. Fact.

6. The book is split between London and Nigerian culture, with the traditions of the Yoruba people woven into the story. What is your relationship to Nigeria?

I'm British Nigerian. My dad is Nigerian, we are Yoruba, and I'm very proud of this, but as we grew up in London, we only got to enjoy bits of the culture - food, music, religion etc. I've always been really annoyed with myself for not learning Yoruba when I was younger but when I found out about the Orisha, I realised there was so much about Nigerian history and culture I do not know about because I'm London-born, just like Sam, yet it is very much part of my identity.

7. All of your characters are incredibly well-rounded and realised. Each also feels essential to the plot and development of the story. What do you feel is more important, or what comes first for you, characterisation or plot?

The character, the person first - our stories come as a result of who we are. We are all so very different, and we forget that in life, and that's what makes life so brilliant when it's brilliant but also hideous when it's hideous. I love to notice people's idiosyncrasies and unique traits; it fascinates me actually how two people can be in the same situation but react so very differently because of who they are. I like to think I'm a very caring person but my fear of snakes means I simply wouldn't be able to save your life if snakes were involved. Soz. lol

8. In particular, Sam's character is a tremendous creation, comprising vulnerability, emotional depth, moral contradictions and talent. Where did he come from and what does he symbolise? Sam is a human before anything else. A human affected by the world he didn't choose to be born into. He is also a voice hearer and a black male which makes him vulnerable in so many ways. There are many Sams in this world, and they deserve to see at least part of themselves in fiction.

What does the story tell us about experiencing trauma and domestic abuse at an early age?

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How does this grief manifest in later life? I wanted to show how trauma and domestic abuse in all its forms - verbal, coercive control, manipulation especially when you're young, doesn't just stay in the past - it follows you into adulthood and shapes how you move through the world. You see characters who grew up in environments where love came mixed with pressure, instability or emotional absence, and that leaves a mark. As kids, we learn roles to cope - being the responsible one, the one who leaves, the one who keeps the peace etc and those roles harden into identity. By the time we become adults, we're still reacting to things that started long before, even if we can't name them outright. With grief, it can come out in different ways at different times. One person might carry everything, feeling responsible for everyone else, and unable to rest, while another copes by creating distance or avoiding difficult emotions altogether. They look like opposite personalities, but really, they're responding to the same early hurt. Sam's story suggests that trauma isn't always loud or obvious - sometimes it shows up as exhaustion, guilt, difficulty in trusting love or not knowing how to exist outside survival mode. What I also wanted to explore is how sometimes grief will accumulate. When loss finally happens, it doesn't start the pain, it exposes everything that's been sitting underneath brewing for years. Adult breakdowns or emotional crises can become moments where suppressed feelings finally surface: anger, vulnerability, a longing to be seen. Healing isn't clean, it's more about how the past lives inside you and what happens if you choose connection despite that, even when things in life remain messy and unfinished.

9. The book is both celebratory and critical on the effects of love; how it can crush a person and lift another up. One of the most brutal lines in the book is when the mother concludes a passage with, 'One more thing, don't ever, ever fall in love.' What is the book trying to tell us about love?

I think the book is trying to say that love isn't automatically healing or safe despite what Hollywood or Disney has been brainwashing us to believe. Love can be the thing that holds you together but it can also be the thing that becomes the ruin of you – I speak from experience of both. Love can also be survival for some, it can give purpose, tenderness, a reason to stay alive. But for others, love becomes entanglement, expectation, or sacrifice, something that slowly erodes our sense of self. So my novel sits in that uncomfortable space where love is life-giving and dangerous at the same time. When Mother says, 'don't ever, ever fall in love, she isn't meaning to be cynical, she's speaking from

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her experience of love which made her vulnerable, powerless and stripped her of an identity she was happily growing. It brought, loss, abandonment and disappointment. It's less a rejection of love and more a warning about how much it costs sometimes. She's trying to protect her son from pain even though that protection comes from her own wounds which she may or may not realise have inflicted more pain on him than love might ever do. Ultimately, I think my novel suggests that love exposes us. It reveals our needs, our fears, our histories. It can also lift us up because it allows us to be seen and connected but becomes crushing when tied up with dependency, trauma or longing for something that can't be fully returned. It sounds anti love but it isn't! I'm trying to be honest about how powerful love is, and how careful we need to be with it. Surviving love something means learning how to live with both its beauty and its damage.

10. For all its dealings with serious subjects, I found the book, and especially its language, to be humorous throughout. Sam arguing with the voice in his head, exasperatedly, shouldn't be funny but it is. Did you consciously try to bring humorous elements in to balance the dark, or was it natural?

When life gets heavy or sad, be it grief, trauma or mental health, people still joke, still argue over ridiculous things, still find doughnuttery hilarious. Especially in south London, I find that we use humour to survive, banter keeps us moving when things become overwhelming. Sam arguing with his voices is something someone I know actually does - they refuse to give into their voices and even though it's sad that they truly believe those voices exist, there is a humour in it sometimes as they can be hilarious in their responses, sarcastic, etc. So, in order for my characters to truly live, their funny moments sit right next to the painful ones - we always say, 'if we don't laugh, we cry' and it's so true.

11. *The Guardian's* regular feature slot 'A moment that changed me' asks writers to reflect on a moment when their life turned on its axis. Please could you share with us three short examples we could use to pitch?

The day I got called a terrorist in the street because I was wearing a headwrap. That's the day I understood that sometimes identity can be projected onto you. It was just after the Woolwich attack, I was on my way to work in leafy Wimbledon and a bloke whispered it into my ear as we got off the tube. It was unmistakable and insidious. The shock is still with me and got me thinking. I'd grown up there, those were my streets but to some I was no longer human, I was a symbol of their fear. And then a nun wearing a headscarf walked ahead

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of me and the stunning hypocrisy wined me and then stirred me into activism. husband Christoph is an archetypal saviour figure who caught her when she was young and vulnerable. Her sister is an archetypal narcissist who lives in a state of arrested emotional development, and Elma is also narcissistic, but creative (as we see from her cooking in the opening scene). In another way, she can be viewed as an undeveloped feminist.

12. Which other books or authors does this book speak to?

Bernadine Evaristo. With Bernadine I feel an affinity because she allows black British lives in her books to be complex, and contradictory rather than being reduced to social issues/stereotypes.

Toni Morrison wrote about how memory, trauma and love can all exist at once inside the body and how personal stories are always shaped by our history and colour of our skin. She also allowed psychological and spiritual experience to exist together without needing to explain or justify it and this was incredibly important to me.

11. What are you writing next?

I'm hoping to write about Sam's parents - Agnes and Bola - and their doomed love story which laid the particular emotional landscape for Sam to exist. I can't wait to get to know them as well as I know Sam.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Louisa Bello is a British Nigerian humanitarian, English teacher, aunt, friend, and devoted Nina Simone worshipper. Raised in south London and now based in Brighton, she lives with her fur baby, Bella, and is widely known for her *Be Kind* mantra-alongside an enduring hatred of snakes and the word moist.

She holds a First-Class degree in Creative Writing from Birkbeck, University of London, and a master's in creative writing from Goldsmiths. For several years, Louisa led successful creative writing workshops for Africa Writes at the British Library and served as a trustee for the charity Pelican Post, organising author book signings at Camp Bestival.

Where The Shadows End was longlisted for the Pat Kavanagh Prize for Writing Excellence under its former title, London Planes, and was supported by an Arts Council *Time to Write* grant.