THIS THREAD OF GOLD

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A Celebration of Black Womanhood

CATHERINE JOY WHITE



DIALOGUE BOOKS

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PART I

RECLAMATION

In which we explore how Black women accept what they cannot change and they reclaim it

Chapter One

SILENCE

This thread of gold that ties me to my mother, my grandmother and the women who came before looks a lot like the colour purple. Like Arabella's wig and the purple hibiscus as it opens, entering a space never been – never seen – before. It is yellow as the fruit of the lemon, yellow as the bus that we shall not be moved from, yellow as the lemonade that we make as we take one pint of water, half of a yellow sun and transform the sour into something sustaining. It is red as the umbilical cord that once physically held us, and red like the blood that we bleed. It is green like the gardens of our mothers that we are still in search of and black like the flags that we wave as we frown, buckle down and plant: bending as we sow, reaching as we climb. It is brown as the soil left down on the ground from the trees that we lift leaving space for the seedlings to reach to the sun and to grow and to glow, as they bask in its light. Golden. Gold. This thread of gold that ties me to my mother, my grandmother and the women who came before looks a lot like the colour purple.

I am my mother's daughter. I am raised by lionesses.

Women as fierce and as mighty as they are brave, as vulnerable and sensitive as they are proud and as beautiful as they are strong. Sometimes they speak truthfully to those with the power and sometimes they prefer to sit quietly and say nothing at all. Sometimes they say no to expectations and sometimes they say yes and break as they cry, down on the bathroom floor. They are ballet dancers, cat lovers and video gamers. They are introverts, pioneers and hopeless romantics. They tell it like it is, but sometimes don't want to hear it.

I am indelibly linked to a tapestry, rich in its colours and delicate, complex detail. Running through each square is a thread of gold, spun from the silk of the sea – the salt of tears and the sweat that accompanies each loving, laboured breath. This thread of gold seems delicate but it cannot and shall not ever be broken, for it holds the tapestry together and it belongs solely to womankind. It is our light. Without this thread of gold, the tapestry is just colours and squares, isolated patchwork cocoons. Without this thread of gold, the tapestry does not exist. It is nothing at all.

My grandmother showed me how to laugh – and keep laughing, no matter what comes my way. My mother taught me humility. My auntie gave me my self-worth, showed me that I was a rare and precious jewel and people should walk across hot coals for me. My cousin taught me how to defend myself, first with my words and then with my fists when necessary: right, left, right (rarely necessary). My sisters taught me when to say sorry, that I do not need to be right all of the time. My friends taught me to take care of myself: to rest and to eat and be gentle, that it mattered less what I did than who I was. These are the threads that are a part of me, woven

into the tapestry that is mine, both of me and in me. I hang on to these threads. I cherish them as I understand that one day I will become matriarch of my own pride. I am because of them. They are and they will be because of me. And so, while any good story starts at the beginning, this isn't the beginning because I come from so many women. From the sky to the seabed and every little grain of sand on the shore, this is our story. It is alchemy. It is magic. It is the orchestra soaring in perfect harmony and it is joined together, piece to piece, by this glittering thread of gold.

I've noticed, as I've moved out of my teens and into the complexities of adulthood, that I have started to choose silence. Silence was never something that I would choose before. I spoke frequently and loudly, even when I didn't have much to say. In fact, I have lost count of the times that a housemate or a family member has remarked on what it is like living with an elephant (annoying, apparently) as I sprint around or thump my way about whichever house I happen to be living in. My mum likes to laugh at me when I go home now, rolling her eyes and telling me, 'We do know you're here, Catherine!' And, as usual, after some time reflecting on it, I think she's right. It is as though I like to remind others and reassure myself that I. Am. Here. I can't be forgotten because look what a vibrant and dazzling human being I am. I want to be seen and I want to be heard. I demand it.

This is why I am perplexed by the fact that in recent years I seem to have stopped talking. I'm not trying to say that I'm suddenly shy. I don't think I ever could be; it's a part of

who I am to thrive off human connections. And yet, there has been something subtle and gradual that has happened, leaving me feeling slightly more measured and perhaps a little more timid. I am more careful about what other people are thinking, wondering if they approve, and this has been transformed, somewhere along the way, into me stopping talking. Looking at myself objectively, as though I were a specimen in a test tube, I think there are a number of reasons for this. There was the manager at work who, as I shared my excitement with him about an idea that I'd had, cut me off mid-sentence and told me that I shouldn't speak so quickly or it would put people off because they would realise how young I was. Then there was the boyfriend who would draw me in close just to see how far away he could throw me, telling me disdainfully that I appeared to have ADHD as I was talking so much and couldn't I just 'chill'? Then we had the long months on my own working and travelling, followed by the drama school experience that branded me a troublemaker for asking questions of an outdated institution in a space that didn't encourage them. You name it, I can see where it came from. Whether this was deserved or not and whether I should have listened to the requests that I button my lip and bite my tongue is another question. What I am clear of, though, is that my newfound silence was directly and causally linked to the more space that I felt I was taking up. In a world that didn't really set out to listen, I was always flirting with the danger of being too loud. And so I learned to arm myself, to opt out and choose silence in certain spaces. The fact that the spaces where I found myself being silenced were both white and almost all male was, until recently, beside the point. Thinking

about this now is uncomfortable. I had entered the world and been raised by the lionesses in my family to be exuberant – Catherine Joy White. I lived up to my name. Somewhere along the way I had lost that exuberance. In a world of black and white, I had adopted a decidedly measured shade of grey.

I often think about what happens in the in-between. In the space between infancy, childhood and adulthood. How do we become? What forms us? If we are created by outside influences that are not our own, then how do they take hold? Where do they come from? Of course, to a certain extent this can be answered by the nature-versus-nurture debate. We are influenced by where we are raised, who we are raised by and how they raise us. And yet it is far more complex than that. We are also influenced by what people expect of us: where they expect us to live, who they expect us to be and how they expect us to be that. If we really tried to tune in and listen to all of the voices seeking to lay a claim over who we are it would be deafening. If we tried to answer back and defend ourselves to every misjudged assertion or claim, our voices would be hoarse. Inevitably silence is easier. And yet silence in this context – when it doesn't feel as though it has come around organically – can often taste an awful lot like defeat. It takes a great deal of bravery – and outright defiance – to hear the noise and yet choose silence or to embrace the noise and keep talking regardless.

This has been an ongoing dilemma for me in recent years. It is as though once I entered my mid-twenties the innate confidence of my youth seemed fragile. As I hesitantly navigated this dichotomy, unsure whether my own voice was liberating or choking me, I became more clouded, more unsure about

who I was supposed to be. You can imagine my relief then when on 19 September 2021, Michaela Ewuraba Boakye-Collinson, more commonly known as Michaela Coel, spoke about silence in a way that felt as though it had been written just for me.

Coel, writer, lead actor, show runner, executive producer and director of groundbreaking series *I May Destroy You*, had just made history at the 73rd Primetime Emmy Awards as the first Black woman ever to win the Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Limited or Anthology Series or Movie. Even before this accolade, Coel was ingrained on my consciousness. Her reflections on her time at drama school had sustained me through my own sometimes miserable training. Coel had experienced for the first time in her life being told that she was too angry and aggressive, observations which would belittle her; bring her to tears even, for in her previous experiences working with Black theatre companies she had always been praised for her positive energy. When I discovered that the school would cast her in parts to 'help' her explore her soft side, I was immediately able (if not to accept) to at least resign myself to my own similar drama school experiences. I was given the part of the servant or the narrator with songs to sing about heartbroken, rejected and lovesick (or even just plain old *sick)* women for the very same reason: I was too fiery. I needed to explore my soft side. I would cast my mind back to just one year earlier when, among my many joyful student drama experiences, I played Rita in *Made in Dagenham*: the role of my dreams.

It was – is – the theatre I am drawn to. Bringing to life women who are complex and complicated, and who get

things done not by being superheroes, but by embracing the quirks of their own personalities, both their insecurity and their bravery, and doing it anyway. And yet, I arrived at drama school and was forced to sit back and watch other women harness their strength and navigate the limits of human emotion while I donned a servant's uniform and explored my 'softness'. I got the point. Sometime after that, I just stopped expecting anything different, letting the silence consume me again.

Fast forward to the end of the year and preparations for our final showcase, the chance to let agents, directors and producers see our work for the first time. It was a big deal. My friend Bella and I rehearsed a scene together from the film *Belle*, a period drama based on the life of Dido Elizabeth Belle, a British heiress raised in eighteenth-century aristocratic Britain alongside her white cousin Elizabeth. I was drawn to their relationship as an example of friendship – of sisterhood – across a racial divide. It was a hard-hitting scene, exploring how we can choose to wound with our words: jabbing here, stabbing there. But when we showed it to the teachers at drama school for approval before showcase rehearsals began, they asked us to cut the end reference to race. I didn't understand. 'But that is the point of the scene. Otherwise it just becomes two young women fighting over a man. It is so much more than that.' Bella was off sick that afternoon, so I stood alone, trying to advocate for what I knew was the story I wanted – needed – to tell. I wouldn't say what I saw in my teacher's eyes was anger. It was colder than that. She told me that my attitude was unacceptable, that I needed to learn some respect and that she would not tolerate my 'behaviour'. This all unfolded in front of a senior

teacher and my entire year group. Every single person stayed silent as I tried to defend my reasoning for why the scene was important – and eventually just tried to defend myself. I left rehearsals that evening in tears.

The next morning that sadness had dissipated. I only felt fire. After a year of having my voice swallowed up, I realised that I would not find the words in a text already written that could convey what I wanted to say, that really encompassed how loud I wanted to scream. I gave up and wrote my own monologue. It was a little piece called *What If?* about an eighteen-year-old finally daring to use her voice and talk back to her friend who sidelined her achievements by telling her that she only got into Cambridge University because she was Black. It's fairly clumsily written and by no means a work of art, but I am proud of it because for the first time since opting for silence, I spoke back. Inspired by learning that Michaela Coel had also written her own work to perform at her showcase, creating a two-hander for her and Paapa Essiedu (who also stars in *I May Destroy You*) with characters who spoke like them, *I started to write my own story*. When it came to writing *What If?* there was no part of me that associated it with me being revolutionary. At the time, I just knew that nothing I was being given was speaking the words that I wanted to speak in the way that I wanted to speak them. Now, however, I give myself a little more credit, noting that this was an early example of me not seeing myself in the spaces that I occupied and so deciding to write myself in.

Because of all this, by the time Coel made her way on to the stage to accept her Emmy Award, in my mind our

experiences were already intertwined. Her words were a part of me, imprinted onto my DNA. As she arrived onstage, she took a moment and then she began to talk. She didn't speak for long and every single word landed like a promise. I watched, holding my breath, as she observed the room filled with glittering stars and heavyweights of the film industry, finally deigning to welcome her in. She saw them and she acknowledged them. But her message was not for them. Michaela Coel looked beyond, raised her gaze and spoke directly to every single person who knew what it was to question the validity of their own voice.

'Write the tale that scares you, that makes you feel uncertain, that isn't comfortable,' she challenged. Dedicating her award to every survivor of sexual assault, Coel used the moment to encourage us to move away from the need to be constantly visible. Speaking not to the industry representatives and the Hollywood status quo but instead to those, like me, who were at home choking on their silence and the seeming uselessness of their voice in a world that is deafening, Coel dared us to be brave enough to disappear from the noise at times and 'see what comes to you in the silence'.

In a way that rarely happens with the typical blah-blah endless thank-you speeches that are the norm at these sort of events, Michaela Coel took the world by storm. Everywhere I turned people were talking about *that* speech. Of course, winning this award was about Coel: it was long overdue and hugely deserved. But what she really did with her acceptance speech was to look away from the noise surrounding – suffocating – each of us and dare us to drown it out. She gave us permission to turn down the volume. What she really did

with her Emmy acceptance speech was turn to her audience, extend her hand and say to us: *This is for you*.

Suddenly, the silence that had been stifling me did not look so overwhelming. It looked like a considered choice, if I were brave enough to let it become one. So I went away, I shut down all of the voices and I simply dared to let the quiet in. In fact, I did what my mum would cry out for when my sisters and I argued about something ridiculous: I 'let the peace of God reign!'

What I found in its space was a compulsion to rewrite my own story. What would my voice sound like if I dared to let it exist, undisrupted? The more I thought about this and the more I sat in the space and the silence, examining what rewriting my story might look like, the more I felt a pull to discover if this had ever happened before. Surely Michaela Coel was not the first woman in the world to call for a time-out; to dare to propose an alternative. What about the women who came before her? Did they have someone to challenge them to remove themselves from the noise of the world, or were they just swept away in its cacophony? I started to search for answers, slowly at first, then growing animated the more I discovered as I found that I could trace women from hundreds of years before Coel who wrote, rewrote and reinvented the story of their lives, taking a narrative, accepting it and then reclaiming it for their own as they wove their truths into the tapestry like silk.

I landed on one period in particular: the end of the nineteenth century as the new horizons of the rapidly changing twentieth century beckoned. I became fascinated with the stories I uncovered. In the United States, the Civil War had

resulted in the end of slavery and Black women found themselves at the heart of discussions being had by white people about what precisely their recently freed 'property' should do. Food and culinary practices, in many ways linked to Black women who had worked as nannies and cooks, guided the momentum and direction of these discussions. Freed Black women were relishing their newfound independence and using it to showcase and expand their culinary skills. Having been more than happy to allow Black women to use these skills for their own benefit for the past century, white people responded to this with much concern.

There was almost a sense that the world needed to explain away this anomaly of freed Black women possessing talent and, more importantly, their ability to showcase these talents, even out of the limited opportunities available to them. Up until this point, culinary talents displayed by Black women had been explained by one tried and tested route in particular: the Mammy figure. With stringent criteria – overweight, illiterate, docile and asexual – a caretaker who cared for the family she was owned by more than she cared for herself, the Mammy had lived and breathed for the previous century primarily as a way of justifying the abominations of slavery. At the end of the Civil War, when slavery was abolished, the Mammy was also set free. Desperate to keep her where she belonged (silenced), the dominant voices shouted even louder and transformed her from Mammy to Aunt Jemima – a commercialised version of her predecessor who sat on top of pancake boxes across America until June 2020. Mammy didn't disappear, she was just given a new name and became even more visible than before.

Born out of the image of the happy loving Black woman, inseparable from food, Aunt Jemima (personified by nanny, cook, activist, model and former enslaved woman Nancy Green) burst into the public eye in 1893 and grew to be hugely popular. Her image soon became nationally recognised, appearing on many household goods and reinforcing the idea that meek and silent Black women would selflessly work for white families, happy with any reward that they were given. Across the country, Black women were silenced; hidden behind Aunt Jemima's smiling mask of contentment. Regardless of whether she is called Mammy or Aunt Jemima, the end result remains the same: even while walking free, Black women continued to be viewed as natural and willing slaves. Even worse, unlike the Mammy, Aunt Jemima did not vanish as public opinion changed. Instead, she remained on those pancake boxes, headscarf across her head, for the next one hundred and thirty years. It wasn't until 17 June 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, that news was released regarding the Quaker Oats food company's plans to finally change the Aunt Jemima pancake and syrup name and logo, stating that 'we recognise Aunt Jemima's origins are based on a racial stereotype . . . as we work to make progress towards equality, we must also take a hard look at our portfolio of brands and ensure they reflect our values'.[1]

For over a hundred years, Black women were forced to face slavery's monstrous legacy as they ate their breakfast every morning. It is no wonder then that Aunt Jemima's descendants have continued to declare that they find this unpalatable. However, just like Michaela Coel, unafraid of the silence, Black women paused for a while, contemplating – cooking.

And then, quietly as they liked, they mobilised. They used the enforced silence and servitude of their circumstances to rework the image projected on to them and instead created a speaking platform for the many other stories more faithfully representing the diversity of Black women's existence. And, way before the Quaker Oats food company finally decided to move on from the damaging image of their figurehead, they started talking.

There is a collection called *The Black Back-ups* by poet Kate Rushin. Published in 1993 and dedicated to 'all of the Black women who sang back-up for Elvis Presley, John Denver, James Taylor, Lou Reed. Etc. Etc. Etc., the title poem offers an alternative image of Aunt Jemima, bringing the real woman behind the fixed smile on the pancake box vividly to life. The poem dedicates itself to the women in Rushin's family, as well as 'all of the Black women riding on buses'; 'the women who open those bundles of dirty laundry sent from those ivy-covered campuses'; 'Hattie McDaniel . . . Ethel Waters . . . Saphronia'[2] (McDaniel is the actor who played Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, a role she was criticised for within the Black community. Waters is a singer and actress, the first African-American woman to be nominated for an Emmy Award, and Saphronia is a character in Nina Simone's revolutionary song 'Four Women', which details the lives of four Black women grappling with their quest for self-identification).

It then moves on to 'Aunt Jemima', who is referred to in a teasing taunt as the words and phrases run into each other, moving from the general observation about Aunt Jemima on the pancake box to it being woven into something personal, transforming into 'ain't chure Mama on the pancake box?':

Aunt Jemima
Aunt Jemima on the Pancake Box
AuntJemimaonthepancakebox?
AuntJemimaonthepancakebox?
Ainchamamaonthepancakebox?
Ain't chure Mama on the pancake box?
Mama Mama
Get off that box
And come home to me.

Reading it for the first time really stopped me in my tracks, reminding me that behind the symbol of Aunt Jemima lies a real person, often someone's mother or wife or sister. It refuses to allow us to let any of these women remain a faceless, voiceless shape. Rushin takes this even further and creates a world where far from just grinning inanely from the pancake box, Aunt Jemima works as a nurse, saving lives. She goes to prayer meetings on Wednesdays and rushes around; she is a whirlwind of personality and colour fighting back against the fabricated concoction that has been placed on her.

There's another poem written in 1983 by poet Sylvia Dunnavant called 'Aunt Jemima on the Pancake Box'. It opens with the question 'Does anybody know what ever happened to Aunt Jemima on the pancake box?' The response makes me get up out of my seat and cheer as the narrator weaves a world where Aunt Jemima 'got tired of wearing that rag wrapped around her head' and she 'got tired of making pancakes and waffles for other people to eat while she couldn't sit down at the table'. And, in a blazing display of fiery autonomy, a woman writing her own story, she tells our narrator

that: 'Lincoln emancipated the slaves but she freed her own damn self'. In a final flourish we learn that 'the last time I saw Aunt Jemima she was driving a Mercedes-Benz with a bumper sticker on the back that said "free at last, free at last, thank God almighty I am free at last".'[3]

What a ferocious reclamation. Not only do these poems show Aunt Jemima as nothing more than a construct, silencing Black women without their permission, but they also highlight her for what she was: a continuation of slavery. I like to think that long before Quaker Oats finally made moves to remove Aunt Jemima from the pancake box, Black women such as Sylvia Dunnavant and Kate Rushin had already been freeing their own damn selves. The most powerful thing about all of this is that as these women have shed their shackles, not only do they rewrite their own identity, but they pave the way for future generations of Black women to define themselves, allowing nothing and no one to force them into a box that they do not want to inhabit. Instead, Black women such as Rushin and Dunnavant have put themselves at the heart of the story that had been wrongly written about them and in a rush of righteous fury, they have stepped off the pancake box, neither enslaved nor bound to any one mode of being, but vibrant and liberated women.

The more I dive into this reclaiming of the real woman behind the image on the pancake box, the more I realise the importance of uncovering – and of naming. Nancy Green, the real Aunt Jemima, who sat on top of those pancake boxes for the best part of a century, no longer exists in the kitchens of every American. But the complexity of losing her image also means that paradoxically, she has been lost too: fading into

obscurity rather than being given the very public recognition that befits someone of her stature. The real Nancy Green was a Black storyteller and one of the first Black corporate models to exist in the United States. She used her profile to advocate against poverty and in support of creating equal rights for all in Chicago. She was also a philanthropist and a church leader, one of the founding members of the oldest active Black Baptist church in Chicago. After her death, she was buried in an unmarked grave where she remained until 2015. Then, after a fifteen-year search, her resting place was rediscovered by a woman called Sherry Williams, founder of the Bronzeville Historical Society. Williams had worked backwards, using the only bit of knowledge that she had for certain – the date of Green's death – to communicate with the Oak Woods cemetery staff and locate the plot of land where Green had been lying with no marker since her death in 1923. Fascinated by Green's life and disturbed by this American icon lying forgotten with no recognition, Williams determined to honour her with a headstone. Romi Crawford, professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, supported the cause, hoping that Green would go on to be remembered for more than just playing a racist stereotype. She stated that: 'the problem with the portrayal is that she was, and Black women subsequently are, plagued by representations that don't align with the scope of their ambition, desires and abilities . . . Knowing her story will help debunk the caricature.'[4]

I reflect on this, grappling for the first time with how important it is to speak out into the silence, paint the full picture – or risk forever remaining a mask of enforced

contentment – a false image on a pancake box. As part of her mission, Williams reached out to Quaker Oats to ask whether they would support a movement in favour of placing a headstone on Green's grave. They responded simply that 'Nancy Green and Aunt Jemima aren't the same . . . Aunt Jemima is a fictitious character'. In other words, they washed their hands of any responsibility. In return, Williams stated her desire that rather than simply removing the logo and pretending that it never existed, Quaker Oats would work to ensure that women such as Green – who they had profited from enormously – would not be forgotten. 'Instead of spending the money on new packaging, put some narrative about the role of Black women in taking care and feeding this nation from enslavement to now . . . and educate [consumers] about Nancy Green herself, whose likeness was used for this package,'[5] she wrote. Nancy Green's life is part of the legacy of America. Her thread runs through the tapestry, binding it with kindness and a fierce sense of justice. Where she was not able to reclaim her own story, Sherry Williams stepped in. It is our collective responsibility to take up that thread.

Reading between the lines of these reclamations, from Kate Rushin to Sylvia Dunnavant to piecing together the real Nancy Green via Sherry Williams' careful investigation, I began to see myself in a new way. I slowly started to understand that without even understanding my actions or motivations, I had already been reclaiming my narrative, snatching it back from the clutches of those who sought to take it from my possession. In every situation I had been in that had silenced me, I had found a way of speaking into the void. I didn't forget about that manager at work who told me I talked too

quickly. How could I? In fact, after years of second guessing my authority, perpetually afraid of appearing too young to be taken seriously, I found myself being interviewed live on American TV for International Women's Day 2021, talking about the impact of COVID-19 on women. Just before they called action, I paused – reminding myself to talk slowly and imbue myself with gravitas and weight. But then, as I thought about my manager and what he would think of me, I looked at the camera and started to think about who I was really speaking for. I felt a lightness – a weightlessness – begin to grow and with what I now recognise to be my style when speaking in public, I infused my words with my passion, speaking quickly but bringing my audience in with me – trusting in my own voice. When the inevitable happened and things went south with that boyfriend (Mr 'Why-Can't-You-Just-*Chill*?') I was shattered. But then, rebuilding slowly from something that had physically and mentally very nearly left me broken, I began to find my voice again. I coined my (now legendary amongst my friends) hashtag: #shinebrightlikecatwhite. Ask anyone I went to university with what song reminds them of me and they will tell you without even thinking: 'Titanium' by Sia. With lyrics such as 'I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose, fire away, fire away'[6] . . . you get the picture. I had been rewriting my story without even realising it. I didn't have to be the little girl I had once been, nor did I have to be the adult I had been moulded into. I was giving myself (or taking) permission to allow for time and space to write and rewrite my own story. And actually, it didn't have to be a masterpiece. It just had to be my voice.

Some years ago, when Michaela Coel was the first Black

woman in the then forty-two-year history of the MacTaggart Lecture series to deliver a speech, she used it to reflect on how important it is that 'voices used to interruption get the experience of writing something without interference at least once.'[7] I feel that in my gut. I am allowed to write – and to speak – without being interrupted. This is my part of the tapestry and I am weaving it out of finest gold.

I count myself lucky to belong to a generation of people who can look up to someone like Michaela Coel. I followed her example and she made me brave. One of the things I love most about *I May Destroy You* (and there are many) is how Coel genuinely doesn't shy away from the fact that life is complex. Nothing is black and white – how can it be? This sounds like an obvious thing to say, but that has not stopped us from neatly categorising things and ideas and situations in a way that helps us understand them. What this has meant for groups in society who are not the mainstream voice is that being heard often goes hand in hand with a distasteful compulsion to make sure that we remain palatable, to write a masterpiece. We've got a seat at the table – just – but it takes every inch of our concentration and physical strength to hang on to it. We had better not slip up by wearing the wrong thing or forgetting what we're holding on to, because if we do we will fall – and it will hurt. Michaela Coel faces this head-on and fearlessly makes work that also highlights her own complexities as much as it elevates her voice. We are rooting for Arabella, obviously, but if anything we champion her more because she is not perfect. Coel does not need us to like Arabella. Michaela Coel doesn't even need us to like Michaela Coel. This isn't an easy thing to achieve because we

are innately human and both our DNA and the way modern society is built function around finding others who want to be near us, who approve of us. But when you really think about it, being liked isn't exactly the point. Actually, we can find our greatest freedom from shutting down the noise, stepping out of this need to be palatable and being brave enough to put our own fears aside, in the hope that by doing so we might also uplift someone else. That is how we really reclaim – and eventually rewrite – the narrative. What if we dared to do that? *What if?*

Bringing a book from manuscript to what you are reading is a team effort.

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