

# WRITING IT UP



**GARETH EVANS**  
GANGS OF LONDON  
(SKY ATLANTIC)



**SUZANNE HEATHCOTE**  
KILLING EVE  
(BBC ONE)



**LENNIE JAMES**  
SAVE ME TOO  
(SKY ATLANTIC)



**MAE MARTIN**  
FEEL GOOD  
(CHANNEL 4)



**LAURIE NUNN**  
SEX EDUCATION  
(NETFLIX)



**SARAH PHELPS**  
DUBLIN MURDERS  
(BBC ONE)

It's been an extraordinary year for television (amongst other things). Six of the writers from the biggest and boldest shows to hit screens talk about 2020 in telly

WORDS ELIZABETH AUBREY  
ILLUSTRATION JAMES DAWE

IN THE UNDERSTATEMENT of the year, we'd like to say, 2020: Christ, what a year! But, amongst the void-screaming, there have been pockets of joy. And so many of those pockets have been stuffed with the golden minutes and hours that have played across our TV screens. It could even be described, in the very worst of years, as the very *best* year for television. These shows tore apart genre, structure and narrative. Radical, disruptive storytelling was embraced and sex, finally, was something that we recognised.

It's no coincidence that the moment coincided with debut writers from under-represented backgrounds filling writers' rooms around the world. So much finally rang true: accents, perspectives and world views from different cultures and social backgrounds. Why? Because the writers who lived these worlds were finally in the room.

Over the last month, *Empire* spoke to several of the leading writers behind some of the best shows of 2020 to talk about why we've never seen a year quite like it.

## "IT HAS CHANGED THE LANDSCAPE OF TELEVISION FOREVER"

**Sarah Phelps:** I was blown away by *I May Destroy You*. It has changed the landscape of television forever because Michaela Coel didn't give up creative control over her own content. That is going to have reverberations throughout the industry. I was just amazed, thrilled and exhilarated by her decision to go: "No, fuck you. I'm not going to sign over my creative content: I retain control." I think more than saying there's a particular show that's changed the landscape this year, I think for me, there's a particular artistic decision that's changed the landscape. Michaela kicked her way through the glass ceiling. **Suzanne Heathcote:** It's been an amazing year for television, and it's come at a time when we've needed it the most. I think now, more than



ever, we're seeing diversity of voices and stories in a way we haven't before. We're seeing perspectives and hearing voices that haven't been heard.

**Mae Martin:** The more there's been authored shows from diverse voices, the more broadly we've seen how everyone can relate to them. People then start to take more risks in commissioning. I think we're hopefully starting to see that things we'd previously have considered niche are actually much more universal than we give them credit for. It means a lot when people reach out and say it meant something personally to them, or that they hadn't felt like they'd seen themselves represented before. The thing I really love is when some 50-year-old guy says, "I feel that way about addiction."

**"WE KNEW WE WERE MAKING SOMETHING THAT WAS MORE OPERATIC AND BOLD"**

**Gareth Evans:** I think people are thinking more cinematically in terms of television now and it shows: the way it's shot is so different from how things used to be. With *Gangs*, we said: "Let's not shrink from what we would normally do on a film set. This needs to look like it would on a big screen." In the writers' room, we were always [wanting] to go bold, to go big, to always push the scope.

**Phelps:** As a writer, right now you can go wherever you want to go with a story as long as you're trusted as a storyteller. I think you can be as dangerous, bleak, dark, violent or as heartbreaking as you want to be, as long as audiences know we're going there for a fucking reason. Not everything with TV has to be a bomb exploding, either. It's the tiny bombs that explode in tiny rooms where some of the best drama lives right now.

**Evans:** In Episode 3, I got to shoot a flashback sequence to introduce Narges [Rashidi, who plays Lale]. It flashes back to Kurdistan, she's waking up [in] the back of that van and shooting through soldiers to get to her husband. As with all productions, you reach certain pinch points and there was a huge chance that the sequence was going to be reduced: it was just going to be her walking down into a basement to find her husband. All the viscera, energy and the emotion was in danger of disappearing. I remember begging the production, "Let me take a run at this, let me design something that I think we can do in a very limited amount of time." We had one day to do that whole sequence: we were bouncing around, grabbing shots. It was a crazy day where we had to split teams, some guys outside shooting stuff, me and her in the main unit shooting the interior stuff with the husband. It was really important because it set up her character, the fact that she was fighting for something, she had that will, that tenacity. I'm glad that I was able to convince



**Below:** *Save Me Too:* Writer/star Lennie James with Suranne Jones; Adrian Edmondson with Season 2 newcomer Lesley Manville; James' Nelly continues his dangerous quest.



production to let me take a run at that even though it was only one day. We knew we were making something that was a bit more operatic and bold.

**"THERE'S MORE ROOM FOR YOU TO FUCK THINGS UP"**

**Heathcote:** I think because you have more time in storytelling in television, you have time to expand on different perspectives, viewpoints, and more stories are being told as a result. I do feel that the people making television are much more receptive to going deeper with what it means to unpack identities; they're branching out into new and different forms of storytelling.

**Laurie Nunn:** I always feel TV has slightly more scope for experimentation, because you're telling stories over such a long amount of time. I do feel like there's something about that, when you're going in as a woman, or somebody from a diverse background; there's more room for you to fuck things up. You can go in and mess around with the structure in a way that I think sometimes can be more difficult in other mediums; that's why so much exciting stuff is coming out.

**Evans:** Pulse Films [originally] pitched *Gangs* as a film. I thought, "We're not going to get to spend enough time with the people that are going to make this interesting." I pitched it back to them: "What if we do a TV show instead? We have long-form narratives, we can go off and



**Top to bottom:** *Gangs Of London:* Lee Charles and Sope Dirsu face off for creator Gareth Evans; Kirney (Mark Lewis Jones) gets heavy with Mal (Richard Harrington); Narges Rashidi's Lale in a flashback to Kurdistan.



explore different characters, introduce new people, get to know them more." That was a big part of the deciding factor that went into why it should become a TV show instead of a film. The scope was far greater.

**"GATEKEEPERS HAVE HAD TO REASSESS THEIR ROLE"**

**Lennie James:** For a long time, decisions have been made in the name of the audiences. Those gatekeepers have had to reassess their role in all of this. We're no longer being held back. It's not so much that they've opened the door, it's that they've no longer got their foot against the door: that's how it felt for a very long time. My hope is that what happens next isn't what tends to happen — particularly to Black and brown people: everybody goes, "It wasn't that big a deal." This isn't the end of the road. This is, in some sense, a beginning. It's not the victory.

**Heathcote:** I feel the audience is more powerful now than it's ever been; networks really do pay attention to social media. The audience is vocal and clear in what they want. I think previously people assumed audiences wanted these very specific, narrow representations, when in fact [they] wanted a far wider range of storytelling.

**James:** I wrote a film for the BBC called *Storm Damage*, and it took six years for the BBC to make it in the way we wanted. All the time that they had it, they used it as an example of what we're now calling diversity. Part of [the

**Left:** Villanelle (Jodie Comer) and Eve (Sandra Oh) in *Killing Eve*'s Season 3 finale, shown by Suzanne Heathcote. **Below:** Villanelle takes on S3's new adversary, Rhian (Alexandra Roach).

delay] was their inability to understand that you could tell universal stories with Black faces. [Meanwhile], on BBC Two, their most popular mid-evening television show was *The Fresh Prince Of Bel-Air* and they didn't see the irony of that situation, of saying, "Audiences might not be ready for it," and yet the programme that kicked off their evening, was very popular and ran for years, was about a Black family. That separation has been one of the things that has been our challenge... With *Save Me*, we were this little South East London fable about a geezer in a puffer jacket looking for his kid. Anne Mensah [at Sky] commissioned us and green-lit us before we had a production company or anything like that. Anne understood it. Anne wasn't distracted by what we looked like or who populated it. She saw that as a plus: we were allowed to get on with it.

**"WE WERE STRIVING TO REPRESENT AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE"**

**Martin:** I think it's important to put a face to some of the really politicised issues that we're inundated with debate around at the moment, and to remember that these are real people. It wasn't in our minds to have any statement or issue-based thing, it very much was just character-driven.

Hopefully all these characters are both likeable and unlikeable. For a long time, we've seen stories where queer people are victims of homophobia, abuse. It's refreshing to see a really flawed queer character who's allowed to be a bit of an asshole.

**James:** I was speaking to Stevie [Graham] the other day about the importance of working-class voices. The UK has a wealth of accents that need to be heard, preserved and celebrated. We need to cherish [them] because there are beautiful stories there to tell. You can tell the story of a thriller on a South East London housing estate and people will watch it: they might even like it.

**Evans:** I'd seen all these films which are supposedly about crime in London, but they all just featured white guys walking round with Cockney accents and I knew I didn't want to do that version of it. I knew I wanted to do something that would at least show how diverse a city it is, how much of a cultural melting pot it is. We were always striving to represent as many people as possible.

**Heathcote:** I think you've got to be honest about people and the fact that they do bad things. If someone does something terrible, nine times out of ten it's because they're damaged because of something that's happened to them. Villanelle >



**Left:** Unlikely friends Aimee (Aimee Lou Wood) and Maeve (Emma Mackey) in Laurie Nunn's *Sex Education*. **Below left:** Fair play: Lily (Tanya Reynolds) and Ola (Patricia Allison) are also navigating adolescence.



**Below, top to bottom:** The darkest of times in *Dublin Murders*; Rob Reilly (Killian Scott) and Cassie Maddox (Sarah Greene) get their heads together; Creator Sarah Phelps on set.



has a psychological disorder, but she's still a human being. It doesn't make her other than [that]: she's still someone who can be hurt, damaged, abused. I do think it's important to humanise even the bad characters; the most important thing at the moment in our culture is tolerance of other people.

**Evans:** I remember the first time I saw *Breaking Bad*, when Walter didn't help Jane. I couldn't control myself! I was like: "Help her! You've still got a shred of humanity!" At the same time, I painfully understood why. It's cruel and horrible but also great writing because it puts you in that moral quandary. It fed into what we were trying to do with *Gangs*, which was to try to find that hook in the audience so that they care about what the characters are doing: you're forced to go along with them, forced to feel something. You don't have to be morally on side with the characters when they do something repugnant or repellent so long as you can understand why.

### "THE BEST WRITERS' ROOMS ARE WHERE PEOPLE FEEL SAFE AND COMFORTABLE"

**Nunn:** In the *Sex Education* writers' room, we very often work with writers who've not written a huge amount. It's just seeing something that's really interesting in a voice and then being brave and taking the risk with them, rather than wanting to fill the room with people that have done it a million times before. People learn quickly. When I did my first writers' room, I'd never been in one before.

**Evans:** I think the best writers' rooms are where people feel safe and comfortable to come up with their worst idea as well as their best idea. I know I've come up with my worst ideas in the writers' room. You just throw [the ideas] out to the room. Each one is a little boat out at sea and the goal is to just throw grenades at it: is it still afloat or has it sunk to the ground? If it's sunk to the bottom, it's not in the show.

### "IT'S NOT A 'MESSAGE' SHOW, IT'S A PEOPLE SHOW"

**Martin:** When I was growing up, characters on queer shows were defined by their sexuality or gender. They could be a bit soapbox-y and didn't feel like shows I could relate to. I hope that's incidental here. The more important story is of addiction, love and human connection. Just because it's me writing it, gender and sexuality is going to come into play because that's reflective of my personal experience, but I hope that's what makes it more accessible. It's not a 'message' show, it's just a people show. You have to sneak in those messages about gender



and sexuality. With stand-up, I found that too. You get people laughing and connecting and they don't even realise they've been exposed to a viewpoint different to their own, that they may have absorbed something from. I hope it's a sneaky side-benefit.

**Evans:** We knew we were going to go off on all these flights of fancy with these wild, crazy, elaborate action set-pieces and I felt like if we were trying to also do a social commentary, I felt like the action sequences would do that a disservice. It would be a weird tonal mix, and it would almost be like the social commentary wouldn't feel right, it would feel cheap, and likewise, it would detract from the action set-pieces. The DNA of what I bring to things tends to be about the visceral, the aesthetic and the rhythms of action. I think it was trying to find something that felt a little bit more nuanced in terms of what we were doing with the social commentary. It's there to be found, but it was never going to be front and centre.

### "IT'S ALLOWING FEMALE AND MALE CHARACTERS TO BE UGLY AND MESSY"

**Nunn:** I think there's been so much more focus on getting more women and diverse writers working in TV, telling their own stories. Suddenly there's a flood of all these very different perspectives coming through. It feels really exciting; I think we've felt like that's what needed



**Top and above:** *Feel Good*: Writer-star Mae Martin (right), with Charlotte Ritchie as George; The show was based partly on Mae's *Mia*. **Right:** *Gangs Of London's* Lala, shot in the boardroom to stand out.



Getty Images, Sarah Shatz, Shutterstock

to happen for a long time. I was working as a writer before *Sex Education*. I had lots of stuff in development, but I couldn't ever push anything over the line; I found it really hard to get into other people's writers' rooms. Suddenly, something shifted.

**Phelps:** There was always this terrible thing where [women] had to be sassy. Why can't she be tongue-tied? Why does she have to be really strong? They didn't bear any relation to women you know; they didn't bring any kind of emotional baggage. But it's shifted. I loved Sarah Greene's performance in *Normal People* as Connell's mother, and Marianne's mum [Denise, played by Aislin McGuckin], who is a product of damage. There was no immediate judgement of: "Will the audience like these women?"

**Evans:** The [gangster] genre tends to be very male-dominated and we didn't want that. When we did the boardroom scene in Episode 1, we were only teasing Narges' introduction, but it was a major point for us that she was going to be in this room filled with men, but she was the one who stood out: we shot her to stand out.

**Nunn:** It's getting more female perspectives to talk about female desire, pleasure, how our bodies actually work. People [want] to have that information. It's trying to talk about sex in a way that doesn't feel titillating or gratuitous, that just feels human, universal. It's allowing female and male characters to be ugly and messy because in reality, that's what those kinds of

sexual experiences are like.

**Heathcote:** I thought *Normal People* absolutely captured the intensity of what it is to have those very important early sexual experiences in your life without making it titillation or sex-scene-for-sex-scene's-sake. Sex scenes in the past have been paint-by-numbers, which are more often than not entirely male-gaze, male-fantasy. It [makes] us feel inadequate because so few of us experience sex that way.

**Nunn:** *Sex Education* is very much a show about communication. On the surface it's obviously about sex, but really, it's about how we need to talk to each other more, how we try to work towards having more honest and open conversations. I'm really interested in vulnerability, particularly with men, toxic masculinity, and how we start to deconstruct and understand it more. I loved writing Adam. He represents a lot of very damaged men I've come across in my life that I think, if they'd had better experiences when they were younger men, life might have turned out a bit easier for them.

**Martin:** I've been in the comedy industry for 20 years; I felt like it would have been a conspicuous omission not to say that environment can have some element of threat. It was very important to me to show it. I feel like I was raised by that community but the early parts of my career, my teens, were defined by those [#MeToo] moments, interactions and relationships with much older men. They're very complex dynamics, especially with people you respect or you're friends with.

### "THE PATH FORWARD NEEDS TO BE IN THE HANDS OF THE STORYTELLERS"

**Phelps:** In the future, creatives coming through whose content is going to be really important to the big streamers, they're going to weigh up what their art is worth because of Michaela Coel.

**James:** I can only speak as a Black man, writer and actor. One of the things that has plagued us is that first run thing. Everything is about that first run, just to be seen, just to break down this particular barrier, win this particular battle: but then what? We have to make this moment different. If there is going to be systemic change, one of the most important things is that the gatekeepers shouldn't try too much to decide what we should write or have too much of a dictate in the shape of things to come. The path forward needs to be in the hands of the storytellers. ●