

## 'What Is and What Might Be'

*Beverley Naidoo*

I want to take you on something of a journey. My thread, not to lose our way, may sometimes be buried underfoot and not always immediately visible. But the thread – multi-twine, multi-coloured – is to raise some thoughts around 'belonging', including the question of whether we conceive of ourselves and our children primarily as members of a particular tribe or of a wider, diverse humanity linked by rights and responsibilities.

I'd like to begin the journey over a hundred years ago. Can you imagine a chief inspector of schools today writing a book in which his opening sentence condemns our education system's fixation with 'outward and visible "results"' that he links to 'the *externalism* of the West'?

My aim, in writing this book, is to show that the *externalism* of the West, the prevalent tendency to pay undue regard to outward and visible 'results' and to neglect what is inward and vital, is the source of most of the defects that vitiate Education in this country. (Holmes, 1911: Preface)

The 'only remedy' for the defects, he says, is drastic. We have to change 'our standard of reality and our conception of the meaning and value of life.' He goes on to propose a view of education profoundly influenced by Buddhism and ideas from the ancient East. He asks questions such as whether the teacher will

lead the child into the path of self-realisation. ... Or will [the teacher], in his thirst for 'results', lead [the child] into the path of mechanical obedience, or, at best, of one-sided development, and so blight his budding faculties and arrest the growth of his soul? (p.299)

Can we imagine a chief inspector today who would choose to debate how we educate our children in terms of ideas generated *beyond* the West?

Now I don't share the writer's conception of civilisations being confined to East and West, with colonial-era notions about Africans and their descendants. But when he later goes on to describe 'A School in Utopia' based on an actual village elementary school and its dedicated, imaginative headteacher, I recognise features of some of the book-loving schools that we authors are sometimes privileged to visit. It is the kind of school where you quickly sense affirmative principles of inclusion and where you meet children who appear, as in the writer's 'School in Utopia': happy, responsive, overflowing with life, interested in many things, full of ability and resource (p.161). He was especially impressed by children helping each other when some were struggling.

I wish I could take this chief inspector of a bygone era to a school that I recently visited in Brixton, south London, where Year 6 children have been reading my book *The Other Side of Truth* (2000).

This is my novel about two young Nigerians whose lives are drastically changed when their mother is killed in an assassination attack aimed at their outspoken journalist father. In the course of reading, the Year 6 teachers took their classes to Victoria Station where they examined the location at which my characters Sade and Femi are shamefully deserted by the lady paid to smuggle them into Britain. The Year 6 children then looked for the Number 36 bus and followed Sade and Femi's route in search of their Uncle Dele who lectures at a London art college. 'Is the London College of Art in your book based on Camberwell College of Art?' they asked. Beginning to explore links between fiction and reality, they were also beginning to wonder about the novel's creation.



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More questions flowed as I ate lunch with a group of children. Three questions remain with me. The first two reflect Britain's deep divisions: 'How many televisions do you have in your house?' asked one lad who seemed surprised when I replied, 'One very old one that I hardly watch.' To another boy's question, 'Do you live in a palace?', I answered no, but later wondered whether my house and garden near the sea might not indeed seem palatial to a child in a cramped south London dwelling. The third question, however, was of a completely different nature – and the most hopeful: 'Do you write plays?' asked a Year 6 girl. When I said yes, an animated conversation followed. She told me about how she had visited the Unicorn Theatre, helping out with a Year 1 class, how she had seen *Emil and the Detectives* at the National Theatre (2013) and how she loved going to the theatre. Later, the deputy head told me of the school's commitment to every child's entitlement to visit the theatre and to work with artists. Incidentally, this school doesn't use reading schemes but promotes 'real books'! For the record, Ofsted's current view of the school is that it is 'good' with some features that are 'outstanding'.

I am confident that this long-gone chief inspector would have admired the teaching and learning in this highly urban school with its strong vision of enabling children to overcome barriers. I also think he would have rapidly found himself challenged on his colonial era assumptions and racial stereotyping of black people.

But who is this writer – and why have I begun with him?

He was Edmond Holmes and he called his book *What Is and What Might Be*. It was published before the First World War in 1911, following his forced resignation, along with that of the Secretary to the Board of Education. The trigger was the leaking of a confidential memo by Holmes in which he had criticised school inspectors who were former elementary school teachers fixated on arid drill methods caused through 'payments by results'. This chief inspector was clearly off-message politically – and it cost him his job. So by the time of writing his book, he was actually an ex-chief inspector. He went on to declare his shame at his own role, over 30 years, in perpetuating a system that deadened what he had come to believe was a child's natural creativity.

In some respects, maybe pre-First World War 1911 is not such a remote era after all when we contemplate other echoes in the 'What Is' of Holmes' title. In particular, I am thinking of the disturbing rise in introverted nationalism that we see in Britain and across Europe as we currently flounder in turbulent economic seas. When I detect traces of colonial arrogance in the limited vision of those at our helm, I sorely miss the insight, breadth of knowledge and voice of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall who died earlier this year. It was Stuart Hall who characterised Margaret Thatcher's politics as 'authoritarian populism' (1979: 15). Emphasising the role of 'race' within this populism, he was prescient about how Thatcherism would influence our politics long after her death.

When I arrived in this country, seeking refuge from apartheid South Africa in the mid-1960s, race, class and gender discrimination were deeply embedded and often overt. But, at the same time, movements were afoot to challenge the old fault lines and a sense of the post-World War Two collective drive to make Britain a fairer place. In education, for instance, Jennie Lee was Minister for the Arts in a Labour government planning The Open University. The OU embodied belief in the power of education to add meaning to – and transform – the lives of individuals who had previously missed out on higher education. Its vision was premised on 'What Might Be' – and its courses were affordable.

While Britain had been divesting itself of former colonies, they still remained a presence through the Commonwealth and migration. The country's demographics were changing: 'We are here because you were there.'

I had been in my first year at my South African university when, in 1961, the apartheid government had walked out of the Commonwealth, refusing to stomach equality with independent African countries. British government and business nevertheless retained strong economic and political ties with South Africa. But by the time I arrived here in 1965, an anti-apartheid movement was growing and mobilising support amongst ordinary Britons who recognised apartheid as morally wrong. Amnesty International, founded in 1961, was likewise uniting people in common action against injustices beyond Britain's borders. Organisations like these were premised on 'What Might Be', attracting people whose commitment was spurred by ideas of social justice and public service rather than financial interest.

The traditional world of children's books in the 1960s, however, remained very much a cottage garden surrounded by high protective walls. Yet here and across the Atlantic, change was afoot in the world outside. We have been offered glimpses of a few books from this era through contributions to the Guardian Children's Books website, following Seven Stories' Diverse Voices – 50 of the Best Children's Books ([www.sevenstories.org.uk/news/latestnews/diverse-voice-top-50](http://www.sevenstories.org.uk/news/latestnews/diverse-voice-top-50)). Incidentally, I've noticed the title being shortened in 'marketing speak' to 'The 50 Best' which, frankly, goes against the spirit of the movement to open the enclosed walls.

The international literary journal *Wasafiri* no. 60 contains some articles that speak of this history. My co-editor, Shereen Pandit, and I called our issue *New Generations: Writing for Children and Young Adults*. In a fine article, Professor Rudine Sims Bishop charts 'Black people's journey across the American hopescape', using the writer Virginia Hamilton's poignant phrase. It was Rudine Sims Bishop who created the memorable image of books as 'sliding glass doors'. She was referring to the need for books through which young people may enter imagined worlds, as well as offering mirrors in which readers can see themselves and their experiences reflected.

The Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes wrote his first book for children as early as 1932. Yet it was only towards the end of the civil rights movement that the Council on Interracial Books for Children was formed in 1966. It has always been a long road – as you can hear in Langston Hughes's poem of 1959 'Mother to Son'.

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters;  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor –  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I'se been a-climbin' on,  
And reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now –  
For I'se still goin', honey,  
I'se still climbin',  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

(Hughes, 1986: 187)

By the end of the 1960s, the African American writer Julius Lester had received a Newbery Honor for his ground-breaking *To be a Slave* (1968), with illustrations by Tom Feelings. This profound little book, recording memories of ex-slaves, reached British shores in 1970 with Lester's dedication:

The ancestry of any black American can be traced to a bill of sale and no further. In many instances even that cannot be done. Such is a true part of my family. This book is dedicated to the memory of my great-grandparents. ... I never knew them, but I am proud to be one of their descendants. I hope that I may be worthy of them, their strength and their courage.

In books that followed, Lester retold stories derived and imagined from this hidden history. Real life informed much of the creative work by other inspiring African American writers for young people – including Trinidadian-born Rosa Guy, the author of a stunning young adult trilogy that began with *The Friends* (1976). Guy was equally an activist, and co-founder of the Harlem Writers' Guild that aimed to develop and aid publication of works by writers from the African diaspora. (Maya Angelou was another member.)

The spirit behind the work of these pioneer African American writers was that of 'What Might Be'. In telling stories that reflected barriers and obstacles, both in the past and the present, what came through was the capacity to endure, to survive – and to imagine a different future.

A few US picture books made their way to the UK. Like other parents in the 1970s desperate for positive images to counter the prevailing norm of absence or negative representation of black characters, I would search them out. Two early arrivals were Ezra Jack Keats' *Whistle for Willie* (1964) and *Stevie* (1970) by John Steptoe. In Britain, Petronella Breinberg's home-grown *My Brother Sean* (1973), so warmly illustrated by Errol Lloyd, was cause for much celebration.

For our *Wasafiri: New Generations* issue, we asked Rosemary Stones to write about developments in Britain. Given her active role, she was well placed to answer the question 'Multicultural publishing in Britain: How did it happen?' In her article, she refers to two seminal black bookshops in London that were part of a cultural movement of creative resistance to racism, promoting and publishing books by black and diaspora writers: New Beacon Books and Bogle l'Ouverture. Significantly, both ventures, begun in the late 1960s, took young people and their education very seriously, as did the community bookshop movement, including Centreprise.

In 1971 a pioneering bibliography *Books for Children: The Homelands of Immigrants in Britain* by Janet Hill, with contributions from various London librarians, revealed a dismal picture of blatant prejudice and bias added to dullness in so many children's books.

By 1975 the Children's Rights Workshop, of which Rosemary Stones was co-founder, initiated The Other Award in Britain. This alternative award considered representations of gender, race, class and disability in addition to literary and aesthetic merit in books for young people. Winners didn't receive money. Instead, posters promoting their books were displayed in schools and libraries. I recall the award receiving flak from some quarters, accused of bringing politics into the cottage garden. But as teachers and librarians began to respond positively, especially in urban areas, awareness began to grow and attitudes began to shift.

Criteria, guidelines and lists were part of a process of educating publishers, book selectors and media to recognise stereotypes and misrepresentation. There were many heated debates.

Two critical journals encouraged the growing awareness, both first published in 1979. *Dragons Teeth*, edited by Dorothy Kuya for the National Committee on Racism in

Children's Books, campaigned specifically against widespread overt and covert racism. The *Children's Book Bulletin*, edited by Rosemary Stones and Andrew Mann, was subtitled 'For news of progressive moves in children's literature' and looked at a full range of representation issues. Although there were only six issues of the *Children's Book Bulletin*, they were hugely influential. I imagine the founders of Letterbox Library read them too.

In 1981, I joined the education group of the British Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, the brainchild of Canon Collins of St Paul's Cathedral, dating back to the 1950s. The redoubtable Canon even got Paul Robeson singing in St Paul's to raise funds. Although banned in South Africa, BDAF (as we called it) secretly managed to send vast sums of money into the country both for the defence of political prisoners and to their families, the latter through a network of many ordinary Britons. With the backing of the education group, I undertook to write a story that would open a window for British children onto what it meant to live under apartheid.

In 1983 my draft of what became *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985) was sent to a number of British publishers, who turned it down. Most gave no explanation. It was my first children's book and I might easily have concluded that my writing wasn't good enough. Had I done justice to the story of two courageous black children encountering the obstacles of apartheid as they strive to save their desperately sick baby sister? One publisher let the cat out of the bag, with the comment that I had a mismatch between the content and the simple style in which I'd written the story. The publisher suggested that I rewrite it for older readers. I declined. Some of you may remember that this was a time when the most widely stocked non-fiction book for children on South Africa – *Let's Visit South Africa* (1967) – told readers that 'The Kung Bushmen have a tiny brain. Their language sounds more like the chatter of baboons than the talk of men' and 'Apartheid is a fascinating experiment.'

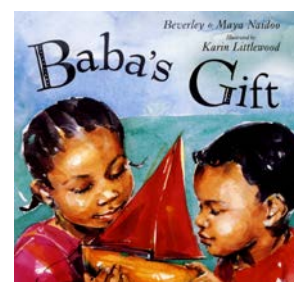
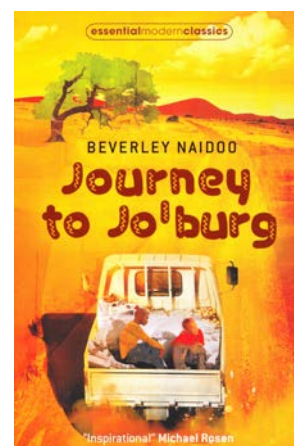
Fortunately my *Journey to Jo'burg* draft was picked up by Longman Education for a series for teenagers who weren't strong readers and published in 1985. The first two copies that I sent into South Africa were intercepted and the book was immediately banned there. Apart from the story, the censors would have seen that half the royalties were going to BDAF, a banned organisation.

Over in the UK, however, the book received The Other Award in 1985. It rapidly found its way into primary as well as secondary schools, especially in cities like London, as well as abroad. When Rosemary Stones joined the publisher Collins as an editor, she took it on as a trade book. A progressive trade editor made all the difference. Next year, 2015, the book that nearly wasn't, celebrates its 30th anniversary.

I set a number of subsequent fictional works in my birth country with its vast store of human challenges. Looking back at these works, it is not just the physical fences, walls and barriers that exclude or enclose, but barriers in the mind that have to be overcome as my characters make their particular journeys. How do you free your mind in an unfree society? Whether you are black or white, how do you imagine 'What Might Be' when 'What Is' powerfully confines and constricts your reality?

None of the stories in my collection *Out of Bounds* (2001) – ranging from the beginning of apartheid through to post-apartheid – is free of that tension, including the final two stories set after the first democratic elections when Nelson Mandela became president. 'The Playground', about the first black girl to enter a previously all white school in 1995, and the title story, set in the year 2000, continue to reflect the challenges of boundaries, especially those in the mind.

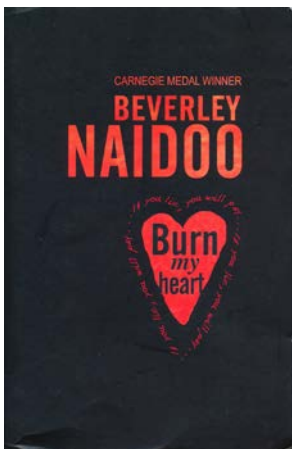
It was some 20 years after *Journey to Jo'burg* before I set a story in South Africa for younger children that implicitly celebrates freedom of movement and, with it, the possibility of new friendships. Written with my daughter Maya and illustrated by Karin Littlewood, *Baba's Gift* (2004) takes young readers on two children's journey through



the dramatically beautiful landscape where Maya’s dad, my husband Nandha, grew up on a sugarcane farm near the Indian Ocean – and from which he had been exiled for 40 years. It’s a story of something lost, namely the little boat that Baba, the children’s father, has made for them to sail on their day trip to the sea. But, more importantly, it’s a story of something found. This is not just a sparkling oyster shell but a sense of belonging to a wider world than that of the rural farmstead from which they have come. Karin Littlewood’s flowing watercolours of children playing on a beach convey scenes that would have been impossible in apartheid days (Figure 1).



Figure 1. From *Baba’s Gift*, copyright © 2004 illus. Karin Littlewood. Reproduced with permission.



However, picking up my multi-twine thread, I cannot say that ‘belonging’, in itself, is inevitably good and desirable. We have to ask: Belonging to what? Sometimes it may be better not to belong. Such questions underlie my novel set in colonial Kenya in the early 1950s. *Burn My Heart* (2007) opens as the Mau Mau rebellion against white settlers is gaining ground. While I was growing up 3000 miles south in Johannesburg, I was very aware of family ‘up north’ living on a farm in the Highlands beneath Mount Kenya. This was the area in the centre of Mau Mau attacks and I remember adult talk of how my cousin’s family was ‘sticking it out’.

In *Burn My Heart*, I interweave two narratives: that of Mathew Grayson, grandson and son of British settlers, and that of Mugo, the ‘kitchen toto’. Forty years earlier, Mugo’s Kikuyu grandfather had been chief over the same land, until dispossessed by Mathew’s ancestors. Mugo’s father, Kamau, also works for the Graysons, looking after the horses.

While the two boys like each other, their friendship is premised on a power relationship. Mugo is older and wiser – but Mathew remains the boss’s son. The arrival in Mathew’s school of Lance, son of a police inspector, brings a new dynamic. When Lance sets up ‘a game of Mau Mau’, with the younger children at the European club having to be Mau Mau and rounded up as terrorists, Mathew is flattered to be made Lance’s adjutant, even if slightly repelled by his new friend’s bossiness.

Mathew sprinted across the lawn towards the guest huts. Around the corner and before he had even reached the first building, he found a cluster of younger children hiding beneath a thick bougainvillea, cascading with orange-paper flowers. When he pulled out the first child, the rest meekly trooped out and followed him to their ‘detention’.

‘You’re not much good at being Mau Mau,’ he said rather crossly.

Within ten minutes, Mathew and Lance had rounded up nearly everyone. It wasn’t much of a game as no one had resisted.



‘When is your dad going to sign up with the Police Reserve?’ Lance asked Mathew as they marched the last captive to the tennis court. In school Lance had told everyone how his father would soon be a Chief Inspector.

‘He says he’s going to... if things get worse.’ Mathew felt embarrassed by Lance’s directness.

‘What’s he waiting for? Dad says if we want to get rid of Mau Mau, we have to do it ourselves. He reckons we’ll all be dead if we sit back and wait for the government to do it.’

Mathew was silent. He wanted to defend Father... to say that Father wasn’t ‘sitting back’. He had built a second security fence, only a hundred yards from the house. He had it guarded night and day by tall Turkana men from the north who had nothing to do with the local Kikuyu. Father never went anywhere now without his revolver, even inside the house. He had even made Mother take lessons how to shoot and she had her own pistol. But what if Lance’s father was correct? What if Father was too trusting? Father wasn’t like some farmers who had their labourers whipped. Everyone knew how Lance’s grandfather used to have his foreman whip men with the stinging kiboko made from hippo hide. Father had never let that happen on their farm. *‘It turns your labour against you.’* That’s why he thought they were loyal. But how could you tell?

(*Burn My Heart*, 2007: 68–69)

Later, when faced with a choice, Mathew chooses to belong to the wrong club, with consequences he will terribly regret. I am sorry I don’t have time to read you some of Mugo’s narrative but here is the front piece to the novel:

‘How do I tell you this story?  
Do I tell you the truth, the whole truth  
and nothing but the truth?  
Do I tell you my side or his?  
What if I had been born on his side and  
he on mine?  
We were both only children ...’

There is a Kikuyu proverb: ‘Nobody walks with another person’s gait’. In an unequal society, is it possible for the youth at the top to see beyond their blinkers of privilege? For the youth below, denied equal rights, where lies hope? Can young people envisage a shared humanity when inequality is extreme?

There are no simple answers although what has brought us here today is our belief in stories: their creative possibilities and their potential to raise consciousness in this striving towards equality. I began by talking about the kind of educational contexts we create for children and whether we expect them to regurgitate, or to respond and engage. I can imagine how a typical elementary school teacher in Edmond Holmes’ day might have ‘taught’ his or her pupils Aesop’s Fables, using the moral for each story as its key ‘learning point’.

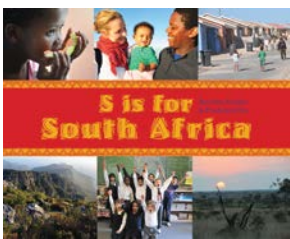
Certainly Aesop’s sharp witty realism reflects ‘What Is’ rather than ‘What Might Be’. Yet his tales offer as much provocation to think as telling us what to think – surely the mark of a great storyteller. One of Aesop’s tales is about how Tortoise gets bored with his life on the ground and desires to fly like a bird. He persuades Eagle to take him aloft but, as you can see in Piet Grobler’s vivid illustration to my retelling (2011: 14–15), he comes a cropper when Eagle decides to drop him (see Figure 2). Aesop’s characters don’t get three chances. As a slave he would have learned that.





Figure 2. From 'The Eagle and the Tortoise', p.15. Copyright © 2011 Piet Grobler. Reproduced with permission. Image courtesy Frances Lincoln publishers.

A couple of years ago, I told this tale to a group of children in a Cape Town bookshop and then invited them to 'hot seat' me as the imperious Eagle. I was challenged by a feisty nine year old: 'Why doesn't Tortoise have a right to his dream?' She was wonderfully indignant at Eagle's indifference to another creature, proclaiming Tortoise's right to imagine and his right to dream. In so doing, I felt that she was also proclaiming her own rights.



Despite the multitude of challenges to be faced in overcoming past and current injustices, what continues to give me hope in my birth country is that the spirit of striving for 'What Might Be' is still very much alive. It's a spirit that I wanted to capture in my poetry alphabet *S is for South Africa* (2011). Rather than accompanying Prodeepta Das's photographs with prose, I chose to write short poems. Poetry offered me a dimension beyond the mere imparting of information – and invites performance by its readers.

F is for Faces, ancestors from many places,  
 With stories to share of one human race.  
 Let all our children be laughing and peaceful.  
 And understand the wisest saying of our rainbow nation:  
 'People are people through other people!' (p.6)





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and understand the wisest saying of our rainbow nation:  
"People are people through other people!"



**Figure 3. 'F is for Faces'. *S is for South Africa*, p.16. Copyright © 2011 Beverley Naidoo (text and Prodeepta Das (photog). Image courtesy Frances Lincoln publishers.**

IBBY continues to face huge challenges in fulfilling Jella Lepman's founding mission. Amongst its most urgent concerns are those linked to children in war, reflected in its Children in Crisis fund. Many of you will know that IBBY has sponsored two libraries in the north and south of Gaza, one of which was completely destroyed by an Israeli rocket during the bombardment in July. The other was occupied by the military and left in disarray with windows and equipment broken. IBBY has pledged to rebuild and restore both libraries so that their books and stories can once again offer deeply traumatised children a way of linking to other children elsewhere and not to feel completely abandoned. For them, death has been a terrible presence.

I want to end by sharing with you a compliment paid by a Palestinian child to her former primary school in East Jerusalem after moving to secondary school. A short video made in Rawdat El-Zuhur ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdPh1hzpE\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdPh1hzpE_k)) indicates a creative, inclusive curriculum, with a strong focus on the arts. The headteacher speaks of a child who came to tell her:

At our new school, doors and windows are closed but at your school doors and windows are open.

This is a compliment indeed for a school in a city where its Palestinian inhabitants are totally stateless and without the most fundamental rights that you and I take for granted. Yet, in spite of the dire reality of 'What Is', this child has experienced a school with a humane vision in which 'doors and windows are open'. What a tribute to the teachers who, in such circumstances, keep alive for young people their belonging to a wider humanity and the idea of 'What Might Be'. We can learn from them.

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