

‘WRITE AWAY’ INTERVIEW BY MADELYN TRAVIS – 21.2.2008

In *Journey to Jo’burg*, in the section “The Writer on Writing”, you touch on issues related to racism that children might want to think about: pogroms against Jews in eastern Europe, which would lead to discussions about the Holocaust, the American south, so slavery and then the civil rights movement, and the British Empire and its attitude towards colonised peoples. But of course you were writing a story about a specific situation. Did you want children to think beyond it to other injustices and racism in the world or did you feel that this specific story was enough for them to take in?

When I’m writing, I try to be in the moment and not to be thinking of anything other than the story that I’m telling. I have to be true to my characters, how they see their world and their feelings as well as being true to my own authorial perspective. *Journey to Jo’burg* was my first book, written more than 25 years ago now, but I think that was my approach then too. In “The Writer on Writing” - in the Longman Literature edition of the novel – I was reflecting on what were some of the influences and experiences that informed me, I suppose some of my own hinterland. Both writing and reading are creative acts and a writer cannot dictate how any reader will read their work. What I hope, however, is that readers will become so imaginatively engaged with my characters and their dilemmas that they will begin to ask questions not only about ‘What will happen next?’ but ‘Why is this happening?’ They will, of course, start with the ‘close-up’ picture because my writer’s lens is focused on the specific and the particular. But they may already have - or will have in due course - other experiences that enable them to make others connections, to see a wider picture. Close readers may pick up signals within the story that suggest there is a bigger picture and begin to ask bigger questions. The South African Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer said that ‘Details make a world’. Equally, the world is in the detail.

Why did you set *Journey to Jo’burg* in the 1980s (which was then current)?

I began writing the story in 1981 and, although I was in exile in England, I was very engaged with what was happening in South Africa at the time. (Isn’t that part of the migrant experience? You live in a place but often, inside your head, you are elsewhere.) Early in September 1981, I proposed the idea of writing the story that was to become *Journey to Jo’burg* to the Education Committee of the British Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (BDAFSA). I told them it would be about two children who, when their baby sister falls ill, make a brave and dangerous journey to find their mother who works in Jo’burg. The story would go to the heart of apartheid’s crime in breaking up families and, as a white South African I was personally implicated in that story. In the Education Committee, we were all very concerned that most ‘non-fiction information’ books on South Africa seriously misinformed young people about life in South Africa. For instance, very few books told readers about the children’s rebellion in Soweto in 1976 against their inferior education. Nor did they tell readers how apartheid police had killed hundreds of young people and thrown many thousands of youngsters into jail. I was already writing a book for teachers and librarians called *Censoring Reality* at that time. But I have always loved and believed in the power of imaginative story. Engage the heart and the head may follow.

Well, the Education Committee gave me three months to go away and come up with a first draft. Then an extraordinary thing happened. Soon after our meeting, the director of BDAFSA, the remarkable Ethel de Keyser, sent me two press cuttings from South African newspapers. Each was about a child who had been separated from their mother and who had made an incredibly brave journey to find her. These

press cuttings, dated 26/9/81 and 1/10/81, were like a sign to me. I might be 6000 miles away in England and creating a story in my imagination about two imaginary children in far away South Africa, but my story was true.

Given that it was your first book, and it was written with a strongly didactic intent, would you do anything differently if you were writing it today?

I don't like the word 'didactic' because it reminds me of my schooling! Even though I had a strong sense of purpose while writing the book, I like to think that my own imaginative engagement in my story saved me from simply telling readers what to think. As a white child, I had been the child with two mothers, with my biological mother who was classified 'white' and my second mother, my black nanny, who only saw her own children when our family went away on holiday and she could go home. I went through a psychological journey in imagining what it would be like to be the child whose mother had been taken from them. It was a very important book for me to write. I had carried memories deeply inside me and I had to work through them. In retrospect I can see that it had to be my first book and it's impossible for me to separate it from that time and place.

How do you feel about *Journey to Jo'burg* being used so much in schools? Does it appeal to you because you did have that didactic intent, or does it just make you think that children won't be so interested if it's something they're forced to read?

Once again, I want to resist the framing of 'didactic intent' as opposed to 'intent to engage'! I believe that I am very fortunate that so many teachers and librarians have continued to want to introduce young people to *Journey to Jo'burg* for almost twenty-three years now. In the UK in 2008, there will be two new editions as well as a Japanese translation. (It originally came out in Japan in English, presumably to be read in school during English lessons.) Young people's cultures, not only in the west, are profoundly influenced shaped by marketing. Globalised publishing, like any other industry, is very consumer oriented and profit-focused. Books have become 'products'. Many children's bookshops sell more toys and fun-gimmicks than books. Authors have been turned into brands and a successful book needs a clear marketing 'hook' within the current climate.

So it is very important that young people have the opportunity to be introduced to experiences that are not dominated by 'the market'. Obviously, the experience will depend on the nature of the educational environment. I certainly hoped that children do not feel 'forced to read' the book but are creatively enticed. The level of engagement in most readers' letters that I receive suggest that teachers who choose to share the book with their children do so because of their desire for their children to enter Naledi's and Tiro's world. Time and again, I receive a covering letter with a batch of children's letters telling me how the children's imaginations have been sparked through empathy with Naledi and Tiro. Children's letters continue to be full of questions as well as quite frequently passionate comments about justice and injustice. If *Journey to Jo'burg* can help young people discover that flame inside themselves, then it is still working.

I know you used to get people questioning whether you were "qualified" to write about the black South African experience because you're white, and I've read a couple of things you've said about that. What do you think it's important to do (or not do!) if you are writing about the experience of characters from a culture you don't share?

You have to be prepared to do substantial research. You have to try to understand the hinterland of your characters – for instance, the historical, social, political context into which they were born. Even though you might not directly write about these things, you need to have absorbed as much as possible knowledge of that ‘hinterland’ if you hope to understand what might be impacting on your characters. You also have to recognise the cultural biases through which each of us views the world. A lot of this operates subconsciously, like invisible lenses, so it’s important to be aware of how easily we can misread situations from a different cultural perspective. Before writing a number of my novels, I have set up drama and writing workshops with young people (both in South Africa and inner city London) to explore areas of experience where I need to expand my knowledge. I have been very fortunate to work over the years with the theatre director Olusola Oyeleye and have learned how drama is such a wonderful medium for revealing the hidden and for raising questions, contradictions and ambiguities. A good fiction writer aims to be a detective of the human heart but every heart is embedded in context... and I haven’t even begun to speak about language! However, all these potential barriers to our understanding people and characters with very different life histories are also a challenge to our imagination. I am still filled with dismay when I think of how racism, including cultural racism, segregates us emotionally and mentally and how limiting that is when there is such pleasure to be had in journeys across boundaries that enable us to recognise another human being with whom we can laugh and share something of ourselves.

Do you think that sometimes there’s a slightly generic “Africa” presented in children’s books, particularly for younger readers?

This does still happen because so many adults here still talk of Africa as if it is one place! There are some very delightful photographic books by Ifeoma Onyefulu that reflect particular, specific places including her home village in Eastern Nigeria. But to most children they will be presented as books about Africa.

It seems that images of Africa for young children are generally positive – there are folktales, lots of stories about animals, books like *Handa’s Surprise*, *Anna Hibiscus*, *Sophie and the Albino Camel*, *Masai and I* (which directly links an African-American girl with her African heritage). Then as soon as you get books for slightly older children you get into poverty, Aids, war. It’s good that things have moved on from the days when you wrote *Journey to Jo’burg* and now many (most?) people accept that literature is a safe way for children to learn about and try to understand the world, even some of the more troubling aspects of it. But on the other hand, surely we don’t want white readers to see only negative images of Africa, and we do want black readers to see positive images rather than always focusing on the effects of colonisation. How does one go about striking a balance for slightly older readers so that they can make a link between the Africa they saw in books when they were small and the images they see in books they’re reading when they’re a bit older?

That’s a very interesting question but essentially, I think, one for teachers. As a writer for young people, I do feel that I have a certain responsibility to find what aspects of hope there are for my characters. I am driven to find that strand of hope because I know real people who survive in situations where the odds are stacked against them yet they stubbornly continue with their daily lives and stubbornly hope. I always come back from South Africa feeling pretty humbled and, more recently, that is how I have

felt after my journeys to Kenya too. So the positive is in people themselves, an extraordinary resourcefulness in the face of grinding hardship.

Kenya is obviously very topical lately, with the lawsuit by the Mau Mau veterans and the current violence. What made you write about the country?

There's a personal connection because I had an older cousin who married a settler and their family was living there at the time of the Mau Mau struggle against the colonists for *Ithaka na wiyathi*, land and freedom. There's also a hidden history. There was so much I didn't know, wasn't told as a child. I think that I'm still driven by that wanting to find out the truth and still being angered and shocked by it.

Why did you decide to take a historical approach in *Burn My Heart*?

Professor Stuart Hall frequently spoke about Britain's 'historical amnesia'. That's as relevant today as ever. We use the term 'ignorance' as if it's some kind of passive state, almost to be excused. But what is the element of 'ignoring' in 'ignorance'? Why don't we know what someone else thinks and feels? Why don't we know the history of 'the other'? How often do we choose *not* to know? I think that is part of the essential framework of *Burn My Heart* in which I keep switching my reader from Mathew, the English settler boy, to Mugo, the Kikuyu lad who works as the settler family's 'kitchen toto'. The story of what happens between these two boys cannot be fully understood or grasped without our knowing the 'back story' – that Mathew's grandfather dispossessed Mugo's grandfather of the land Mathew's family now owns. History is in us. We are our history. But, as they say, 'When did the lion tell the zebra's story?'

What kind of research did you do? Did you go there? Did you do book/internet research or mostly talk to people?

In 2004, I was very fortunate to be invited by the British High Commission in Nairobi to make a two-week author visit as part of their UKenya programme to mark Kenya's 40th anniversary of independence from Britain. I was taken to meet children in the wealthiest and poorest of places. It was very thoughtfully planned and provocative. I was also able to visit the area where my cousins had lived. Two very significant books had also just been published in the UK about the end of empire in Kenya and what happened under the State of Emergency: David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged* and Caroline Elkins' *Britain's Gulag*. As a student I had read Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels and they had powerful effect on me. I got hold of a good number of books, especially by Kenyan writers, that took me into that period. The following year I was invited to spend a week in an international school in Nairobi and also contribute to the Caine Prize for African Writing workshop in Naivasha. I built in a few additional research days to go to specific places. We had a very excellent driver who was a great help once he knew my interest. He spoke of his own childhood experiences as a Kikuyu child and he also managed to locate a former Mau Mau general living in a small village who agreed to an interview. So before I started my imaginative journey into Mathew and Mugo's lives, I immersed myself in whatever I could find. I should add that I always find photographs and pictures enormously helpful.

Did you know Kenya at all before you wrote the book?

That was my first visit to Kenya in 2004.

Did you study Swahili and Kikuyu at all, or did you know enough for your purposes?

I got hold of some books – Kikuyu grammar and proverbs – and consulted a friend. There's a Swahili dictionary online.

It was obviously important for you to show the difficulty a white child would have had in trying to challenge the beliefs of their parents and the norms of their culture in order to do what's right. Sounds autobiographical!

In retrospect, I think that you are right. Although the histories of Kenya and South Africa are different, there was much in common in relation to the colonial experience. A friend of mine who was brought up in what was then Bechuanaland (Botswana) read the book and wrote this to me:

"It evokes my own childhood in the separations between colonial society (where we were on the fringes as non-Brits in Bechuanaland) and the people it 'camped' amongst; subtle racism and assumed superiority co-existing with friendship and reliance. The characters reminded me of people I knew."

How many children talk about these kind of power dynamics with their parents?!

Why have you turned to writing about countries other than South Africa?

Life is short and I don't want to be fenced in...

Have you read any children's books about Africa lately that you think are particularly good? Or perhaps particularly bad, if you're willing to say? What did you like/dislike about them?

There seem to have been a number of fiction books published in the UK set on the continent recently, although sadly none by talented African writers who continue to write vivid, gripping stories despite the struggle to survive as a writer on the continent. I haven't read all these relatively recent books yet and I'm looking forward to reading Sarah Mussi's *Door of No Return* set in Ghana where she has lived. (I once visited Elmira Castle and have never forgotten the horror of the cells and that final single-file door through which the slaves were led.) I've read two books that are set in the more recent past and one contemporary novel. To varying degrees in each of them I wished that the writer had done their research much more thoroughly. It's unfortunately very easy to lose a reader's trust.

I read a book about South Africa recently that got bad reviews – people complained that it was patronising and bordering on racist, although it was obviously written with good intentions. I have heard, and made, the same criticisms over a recent book about the Holocaust. What would you say about books like these? Is it better that they're not written at all, even if the author's intentions are good??

Work must be judged on how well it is done not on intentions, nor indeed on who has written it. What is probably most worrying is that errors of credibility are not being picked up at the editorial stage and that it would appear that editors are not always using readers who know the field. In the 1970s and '80s a lot of work was done around issues of representation and various criteria lists were developed, albeit

sometimes rather lengthy and cumbersome. They were meant to help sensitise critical perceptions and readers' antennae and they emerged from a ferment of discussions and debates, often heated. The process was later characterised – and frequently misrepresented – as simply 'political correctness'. The people who laid this charge of course presented themselves as neutral arbiters. (I used to joke that the latter were actually the PPC – the powerfully politically correct!) Of course no one is, nor can be, neutral. We all benefit by books being the very best that they can be. We also all benefit by our having a strong culture of debate about questions relating to our fractured world. So I think we are looking at a wider problem here. It's ironic that at a point when there has been so much talk in publishing about diversity, that a predominantly white western market remains the driver. Literature has an important role to play in our cultural life. Like Sontag, Llosa, Gordimer, Soyinka and so many international writers, I believe passionately in the role of books and that we have to defend them because they are windows onto our world. So when corners are cut, whether in books for adults or young people, it matters.

Have you been back to South Africa lately? What is it like now, and if you were writing about it today (*are* you writing about it at the moment?), what images of it would you create/reflect?

I spent a month there in 2007 and ran a number of drama/writing workshops in some urban and rural schools. I wanted to reconnect to young South Africans and to hear their voices. Their dramas were dramatic, serious, troubling, but shafted with energy, wit and humour. There is a very stark gulf between rich and poor. But urban or rural, rich or poor, the dreams of all young South Africans are being significantly shaped by decisions made in multinational boardrooms. Is this our new Freedom that Naledi dreamed about in *Journey to Jo'burg*?

Yes, I have an idea for a new novel but it will have to wait while I undertake a project close to my heart for adult readers. However, this year I am also guest editing, with Shereen Pandit, a 2009 issue of the international literary journal *Wasafiri* www.wasafiri.com that will focus on children's and young adult literature. I shall also be part of the jury for the 2009 NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature. For this, I have been asked to nominate and be an advocate for an author whom I believe has made a difference to the quality of children's literature. I have chosen to advocate Jamila Gavin with her wonderful *Coram Boy* as her 'representative text'. As jurors we may email each other but the key discussion and decision will be made through an international telephone conference. I am intrigued and looking forward to this enormously!

In the meantime, just for something completely different, I have a book of mermaid tales coming out with Barrington Stoke in the summer, *Call of the Deep*. It includes my retelling of the tale of one of my Cornish ancestors, the Mermaid of Zennor. Hope you enjoy it!