

## CHILDREN'S AFRICANA BOOK AWARDS 2010

HONOR BOOK FOR OLDER READERS

BURN MY HEART (Amistad, HarperCollins)

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH by Beverley Naidoo

National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., 6 November 2010

Warm greetings to all of you who have come together for this special day of the African Studies Association and the 2010 Children's Africana Book Awards. While unfortunately I'm not able to be with you in person, I am with you in spirit... and what better place than in your National Museum of African Art. The choice of this venue reminds me that in Britain where I have lived since 1965, despite Britain's deep links with much of Africa as the former major colonial power on the continent, we have no equivalent museum of African art. Indeed it wasn't until 1995 that we had the first major exhibition - 'Africa: The Art of a Continent' - at The Royal Academy in London. This wonderful exhibition brought together art works on loan from collections within Africa and around the world. Today, if you want to see some treasures of African art in a permanent collection, there is really only Room 25 at the British Museum. I should add that many, like the Benin bronzes, were obtained through 19th century colonial plunder at the point of a gun.

The place in which you have gathered leads me to saying a few words about one of my key impulses in writing *Burn My Heart*. I'm talking about forgotten history, hidden history. You probably know the saying: 'The lion won't tell you the zebra's story.' Very early on, as the idea for this novel began to emerge, I had a sense of unearthing something secret. I found this amongst my first notes:

*Story within story. Burying shame. Father and son. Man and boy. Friendship. Betrayal. Father buries story from childhood... But unearths it and tells it to son who is in process of betraying a friend.*

*Burn My Heart* began, in my imagination, as a story that a father has buried. A guilty secret. In the course of writing, I removed this 'outer' story so that there is no visible narrator. My readers now step directly into 1951 Kenya, shifting between Mathew Grayson – son and grandson of English settlers - and Mugo, who works in the Grayson's kitchen and whose Kikuyu grandfather and family were dispossessed of their fertile land beneath the mountain Kirinyaga by the settlers. The only trace of the narrator whom I originally imagined remains in the front piece:

*“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...”*

But why did I set this colonial story in Kenya? I grew up as a white child in Johannesburg South Africa, 2000 miles south of Kenya, at the time of the Mau Mau. I too experienced a white colonial childhood, hearing what most children in Britain heard about terrifying attacks by Mau Mau who broke into settlers’ farms and who killed Africans believed to loyal to the settlers. Yet I heard nothing about the terror of being dispossessed, nor the struggle to regain land, equal rights and freedom. I heard nothing about the brutal suppression of the rebellion by the colonial authorities aided by 55,000 British troops, the detention without trial of 150,000 Kikuyu men, women and children and so on.

I was also aware of Kenya through an older cousin who had married a settler and gone to live on a large farm in the Highlands. Immediately after Kenya’s Independence, the family came to live in South Africa, fearing retribution under the newly elected Kenyatta government. Their youngest son, Neil, was ten when they arrived in apartheid South Africa where most white people continued to support white domination. My cousin’s family moved to the Cape and I didn’t meet them at the time. It was 1964, the year that Nelson Mandela and his comrades were sentenced to life imprisonment. It was a time of arrests, detention without trial and torture.

I was caught up in this, still a ‘small fish’. I had been fortunate to have had my ways of seeing challenged by my brother and university friends. I had realised that if I didn’t actively join the resistance, I would continue to be complicit in apartheid and its evils. My few weeks in jail were part of my education. For black South Africans the whole country was a vast jail. In 1965, with my brother and various friends set to spend several years in jail, I left for England, not realising that my study abroad would turn into 26 years of exile.

On 5<sup>th</sup> February 1982, I was listening to BBC news when I heard that a 28-year-old doctor, Neil Aggett, had been found hanging in his cell at Police Headquarters in Johannesburg. I rang my mother. Yes, it was Neil, my cousin’s son. He had been working in hospital two nights a week while spending most of his time as an unpaid trade union organiser. Although he was one of many detainees who died after torture by apartheid’s brutal security police, he was the first white person to meet this fate. Many thousands of black workers followed his coffin through the streets to the cemetery, singing songs of resistance and freedom, turning his funeral into the first major political

funeral since that of Steve Biko a few years earlier. Neil's parents were devastated. The state they had trusted had taken their son's life.

Who could have predicted this transformation for a *mzungu* child born into a settler family at the height of the Emergency in Kenya? Neil was born after my novel ends but I believe that my desire to set a novel in Kenya was fuelled by the desire to explore imaginatively the world into which he had been born. Neil is not Mathew in the novel but, among other things, I wanted to think about both complicity and change.

In 2003, out of the blue, I received an invitation from the British High Commission in Kenya to undertake an author tour as part of their UKenya celebrations, commemorating 40 years of Kenya's independence. It was an excellently planned tour that let me to see something of the starkly different worlds of haves and have-nots. It took me through the Highlands where so many white settlers had lived. I re-read the novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and widened my reading of fiction and non-fiction to a point where I felt confident that I could embark on a historical novel. A year later, on a second visit to Kenya, I was ready to undertake some focused research.

Once I began writing, I was struck by how the themes that I was exploring in early 1950s Kenya were universal and, sadly, contemporary. Mathew and Mugo inherit a world not of their own making. Today, people and nations continue to invade and occupy the lands of others, displacing inhabitants, disrupting lives with the injustice leading to familiar cycles of violence. Children who could be friends are forced apart by the histories and narratives they inherit. What do colonisers and invaders of other people's lands tell their children? What do they *not* tell them? How different are the stories told by parents whose lands are occupied and dominated? By shifting between Mathew and Mugo, experiencing each of their realities and viewpoints, I hope my readers will be stirred to ask deep moral questions about the tragedy that unfolds between them – as well as ask questions about 'ways of seeing'. I certainly thought a great deal about the Kikuyu proverb: 'Nobody walks with another person's gait' or, as Mugo's mother says to his father in defence of her elder rebel son: 'If you walked in your son's skin, would you not feel like him?'

Power corrupts the truth as much by silence as by assertion. The stories we inherit help to shape us. Some stories can help us see the world more clearly, extend our awareness and empathy; while other stories entrap us and narrow our vision. Yet a search for truth has its own imperatives if we are capable of opening our ears and eyes. I believe that stories, like experience, can also plant seeds of change. I dearly hope that my novel is of the planting variety. I offer my warmest thanks to

the African Studies' Association for your recognition in naming *Burn My Heart* an Honor Book for Older Readers.