

## INTERVIEW WITH COMMON GROUND FOUNDATION BOOK CLUB, June 2009

Here's our interview with **Beverley Naidoo**, author of our June book club selection **BURN MY HEART**. She answered the questions that book club members submitted. See what she had to say!

Q: *Is this book based on a true story?*

A: *Burn My Heart* is set almost 60 years ago in Kenya at a time when the country was a British colony, ruled by white settlers and the government in Britain. The story takes place at the time when Mau Mau resistance fighters began to attack the settlers and British soldiers. We know that President Barack Obama's grandfather was accused of supporting the Mau Mau and locked up in a detention camp for six months where he was treated very badly. So the setting of my story is absolutely true. My characters – Mugo, Mathew, Lance and all the adults – are made up but I hope that they are as believable as real people.

Q: *I was very sad for Mugo and his family. Are people still treated this way in Africa—the way Mugo and his family were treated?*

A: I was also very sad as I wrote Mugo's story. Kenya is no longer ruled by the British but while some Kenyans today are rich and powerful, many Kenyans are still terribly poor and have to struggle very hard to live and look after their families. There are slums that no human being should have to live in but there are also people who do amazing things to keep going and who have a vision of making life better. For instance I've met some great people through the KidsLibs Trust that supports community libraries. Have a look at their website and you'll get a little glimpse! It's <http://kidslibstrust.org>

Q: *I want to learn more about life in Africa. Can you recommend other books?*

A: Well, Africa is an enormous continent with over 50 countries and over 2000 languages. There are many wonderful writers. I'll just mention a few, written in English, that include young characters. Two of the many books set in Kenya at the same time as *Burn My Heart* are *Weep not, child* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and *The Mzungu Boy* by Meja Mwangi. *Things Fall Apart* is a classic by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe and *Nervous Conditions* is a fine novel, written in the voice of a young girl, by the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga. Henning Mankell is a Swedish writer who spends a lot of time in Mozambique where he has set two gripping stories about a pair of sisters: *Secrets in the Fire* and *Playing with Fire*. If you haven't read any South African novels, you might try my *Journey to Jo'burg* and *Chain of Fire* – both set when Nelson Mandela was still in jail - or *No Turning Back* about a boy, Siphosiso, who joins a gang of street children after Nelson Mandela was freed from jail, but before the first democratic elections. Siphosiso was on the rocks and the country was on the rocks.

Q: *What was your life like as a child?*

A: I had a happy childhood but I was completely unaware as a white child of the horrors of apartheid and how racism was damaging lives of black South Africans. I also didn't realise then how racism was limiting my mind. That also is damage. If you go to the FAQ on my website, you can read more about that: [www.beverleynaidoo.com](http://www.beverleynaidoo.com). I'm very thankful that

when I grew up I had experiences that helped me take away the blinkers. I began to challenge the racism around me and in my head. It's a life-long process.

Q: What do you hope your stories will do?

A: First of all, I hope that I will grip my readers with these stories, so that they will want to keep turning the pages to find out more. I want to take readers into the world of my characters so that they experience it from the inside. I also hope that the experience has taken them on a journey so that, at the other end, they may see things a little differently. Journeys have the power to change us a little and to encourage us to ask new questions. To me, this is the most wonderful thing about reading a book that absorbs you. Isn't it amazing how these little marks on a page can fill our minds and hearts with all manner of thoughts and feelings?

Q: Do you live in Africa?

A: I lived in Johannesburg - Jo'burg, Jozi, eGoli... many different names! – until I was 22. After being detained in jail without charges, I was released and I began to think about studying in England for a while. I left just as my brother, who had been on trial for his resistance activities, began a two-year jail sentence. I had intended returning but when the South African government wouldn't renew my passport, I realised that I was now in exile. I was fortunate that the British government gave me a British passport. I married another South African exile and we made our home in Britain. I went back freely to South Africa after 26 years in 1991 - the year after Nelson Mandela was let out of jail.

Q: What will your next book be about?

A: I've just completed two books for younger children: a retelling of *Aesop's Fables* and poems for a photographic alphabet book *S is for South Africa*. But my big project at the moment is writing a biography of my cousin Neil Aggett. He was born into the world of *Burn My Heart*, the son of settlers. His mom was my first cousin and Neil was younger than me. When Kenya became independent, his father brought the family to South Africa where there was apartheid. It was the year that my brother and I were detained. But when Neil went to university he began to see apartheid for what it was and hated the inequality. Although he trained as a doctor, he became an unpaid trade union organiser, working at night as a doctor just enough to support himself. The security police arrested him and ten weeks later he was found hanging in his cell. The police said that he'd committed suicide but it came out that they had tortured him. Whatever actually happened, he had died in their hands. He had great ideals about equality and justice. His death – like all the other deaths in detention – arose from the abuse of power. It was a terrible waste of a life. I never met him, so this book for adults is certainly a journey for me. I intend to call it *Death of an Idealist*.

Q: *How have people responded to Burn My Heart?*

A: Many readers, like you, have commented about feeling very sad about Mugo's story. I've been glad that some readers have also commented on Mathew and how he has learned something by the end of the story. Perhaps you'll recognise times in life when you think, 'If only, I had – or hadn't – done this or that...'. I've been especially pleased with some comments from readers in Kenya who have shared the story with parents and grandparents who have told them that the story is very true to the time.

Q: *Have you ever met Mr. Nelson Mandela?*

A: I've been in the same room a few times and he has a wonderful presence. He represents for me the idea that human beings are capable of decency, fairness, kindness, generosity... and that we should absolutely reject injustice.

Q: *I want to be a writer. What do you suggest that I do? I am still in high school.*

Read, read, read! Read as widely as you can. Let other writers' words take you and your imagination on more journeys than you can count. Also, keep a notebook. Write and play freely with words yourself. Those marks that you make on the page are the beginning of your own journeys that can take you anywhere. Go well!