

## Africa

‘Africa always offers something new.’  
(Pliny’s *Natural History*, c.70CE)

In devoting this issue of *IBBYlink* to children’s literature associated with the continent of Africa we are at the same time seeking to emphasise the ‘International’ in IBBY, and celebrating the Congress which recently took place in Cape Town, South Africa. We are fortunate to have shortened versions of two of the talks given there, by Beverley Naidoo and Elizabeth Laird – longer versions will in due course appear in *Bookbird*. - as well as insights from one of the judges of the Macmillan Writer’s Prize for Africa, an award created to encourage and promote the very best in contemporary African Children’s Literature. Our thanks to Macmillan, too, for sponsoring this edition of *IBBYlink*.

A brief scrutiny of my bookshelves in search of children’s books set in Africa came up with, I am sure, significantly fewer than those about America, many of the countries of Europe, or indeed, India and the far East (the subject of this year’s IBBY conference and consequently also for the next issue of *IBBYlink*). In the past, when they did appear in children’s books, Africa and Africans tended to be presented with a mixture of exoticism, mystery, danger and the primitive. Nineteenth century authors such as R.M. Ballantyne and Rider Haggard are scarcely to be depended upon for accurate pictures, but even in the first half of the twentieth century, Hugh Lofting’s ‘Dr Dolittle’ series and Jean de Brunhoff’s ‘Babar’ books have provided elements for analysis in terms of their stereotypical depiction of African characters.

The situation is far different today, as a number of gifted authors and illustrators have succeeded in presenting African settings without either condescension or a false mysticism. While the renowned illustrator Niki Daly is probably the best known, Verna Aardema (*Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*), Ifeoma Onyefulu (*A is for Africa*), Sheila Gordon (*Waiting for the Rain*), and

Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch (*Grace and Family*), have all made significant contributions in very different ways to the portrayal of Africa as a continent not without problems but with an immense amount to contribute to the world. The distinguished Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has also lent support to the cause of children’s literature about Africa. It is good too to be able to claim that books about Africa by Beverley Naidoo and Elizabeth Laird are, hopefully, too familiar to IBBY readers for their titles to need mentioning here! But more are needed, both to widen the horizons of readers in other parts of the world, and to afford a reasonable opportunity for publication to the many potential authors from the various African cultures and backgrounds. They are likely to be the most effective ambassadors for their countries and also to have an immediate appeal to the many potential African children readers wanting to ‘find themselves in books.’

**-Pat Pinsent, editor**

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# Out of Bounds: Witness Literature

Beverley Naidoo

For generations, South Africa's children, black and white, learned racialised histories. White Europeans controlled the narratives in books and were the gatekeepers to the world of literacy and literature. For generations, if black people appeared in fiction, it was largely in one of three ways: as savage, servant, or comic buffoon. They were commonly described in terms of animal imagery, even by writers who thought they were sympathetic to their subjects. This did not occur only in South Africa. The illustrations in de Brunhoff's successful 'Babar' series, still in print, helped to construct and reinforce in millions of young readers' minds the concept that black Africans were more animal than human; in *Picnic at Babar's*, Babar and his family all have personal names and speak our language, while the Africans are shown as monkeys in a mixture of comic buffoon and savage. In other words, the animals have been humanised while black Africans have been brutalised. Such images can work powerfully on the subconscious.

White racialised narratives held sway in the USA and UK until African-American writers, in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, began to break into the bastion of children's books. Julius Lester's *To be a Slave* (1968) led the way in the USA as the first major book of 'witness literature' for young people. Lester, Rosa Guy, Virginia Hamilton, Mildred D Taylor and others began to open out for readers a black world that had been despised, trashed, ignored. The children's book world slowly began to wake up to a well of talent among black storytellers and writers.

In South Africa, however, the white Board of Censors and apartheid education departments continued to control what young people read. Only a handful of community-oriented organisations and publishers risked challenging the racist status quo and having publications banned. It required the imagination and ingenuity of a writer like T. N. Maumela to create a novel like *Mafangambiti The Story of a Bull* (1975) that could slip through the censor's net despite its symbolism of an African spirit that refused to be subdued.

In the early 1980s I first discovered that the vast majority of so-called non-fiction books for children about South Africa in Britain totally misrepresented the country, whether because of their overt racism or by omission. In the British Defence and Aid Fund's Education

Committee we recognised however that pushing for more accurate information books was not enough. There was a desperate need for literature that could touch readers' imaginations. I recognised that 'witness literature' by Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele and many others had been part of my own journey as a white South African in crossing racialised borders. Stories are a way of making sense, first of all for the writer and then for others. What defines 'witness literature' is that its stories and characters are umbilically connected to their wider society. But this is not documentary or journalism. The key issue in this genre of fiction is transformation of the reality in the process of writing. Each time there is an aesthetic quest to find the shape and form that illuminates the moral dilemmas, the questions at the core. It is this aesthetic, creative quest that creates space for the writer's imagination.

When writing, I make a journey across the fence into the lives of characters at very particular points in time and place. I frequently take myself into the lives and perspectives of children I wasn't – and in the South African context the most pressing challenge has been for me to cross our racialised borders. In my first novel *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985), two black South African children, Naledi and Tiro, from a rural area, make a dangerous journey to find their mother in the city, in the hope of saving their desperately ill baby sister. This separation of children from parents was enforced by apartheid laws. For the children the journey to the city is psychological as well as physical as they discover what is happening around them. It was a psychological journey for me too, as I realised that even as a child I was implicated as a beneficiary of apartheid. Even when the book was published in England it remained banned in South Africa until 1991. When I returned there I was very happy to find that it stood the test and was approved by black students.

Occasionally, in Britain, I have been challenged about my credentials as a white writer writing about black experience. The first time it happened publicly, a young black South African comrade from the African National Congress jumped in before I could reply with words to the effect: 'This is what we are fighting for in South Africa, not to be restricted to our own so-called "racial group"'. My own view was that it is essential to make a distinction between the creative domain and

the politics of book production. It is essential to be campaigning and promoting access for more black writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, designers – for more black participation in every area of production – but this political activity should not dictate creative activity. The work must stand or fall in terms of its own artistic merit. To judge work in terms of the so-called racial classification of the author is a backward step. It confirms the racialisation of experience and imagination.

*Chain of Fire* (1989) is an exploration of what might have happened to Naledi and Tiro, and involved research, the material of which is now archived at the Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape. In this novel, violence and violation are more direct than in *Journey to Jo'burg*. People are banished. Homes are demolished, villagers deported into so-called 'homelands'. Most of the white characters appear as ominous shadowy figures who exercise their power from a distance; from the perspective of Naledi and Tiro, this would have been the reality.

When I returned to South Africa after 26 years, I decided my next novel needed to reflect the legacy of apartheid, so the obvious choice for a central character was a streetchild... a child who inherits a broken family. I created my own runaway street child Sipho whose name means 'Gift' yet whose mother does not seem able to protect him from an abusive stepfather. Through Sipho's story, set in the last violent months of the apartheid regime, I wanted to reflect emotional as well as physical truths of children in a traumatised, fractured society who desperately want a life. I also wanted, through a white girl, to reflect the voices of those young white South Africans who aspired to a different future from the one their parents had previously offered them, and the difficulties attending friendship in such a deeply racialised society. I was relieved to find that my South African readers believed in the fictional characters and situations.

*No Turning Back* was published in 1995, the year after South Africa held its first democratic elections. It felt the right time for me to shift my focus. As soon as I began to think about setting a novel in the UK, I immediately knew that my central characters had to be young refugees, a theme involving injustice and power, racism, family and friendship just as in my South African novels.

*The Other Side of Truth* (2000) opens with an assassination attack on the bravely outspoken journalist father of two children in Lagos. Sade and Femi's mother is killed in the attack and the children are smuggled to safety in England,

where they find they are illegal and the truth is dangerous. In addition to exploring exile, dislocation and loss through children's eyes, I also wanted to explore how it is for young people whose parents challenge unjust powerful authority.

My collection *Out of Bounds* (2001) forms a retrospective for me, with each story set in a decade of South Africa covering my lifetime and the era of apartheid, ending with two stories at the beginnings of 'post-apartheid' both with the theme of crossing racialised boundaries. In 'The Playground', set in 1995, a fence surrounds the formerly all-white school where white parents remain resistant to change, and through the characters I explore, in this book and in a subsequent play, how Rosa crossing the physical boundary is a merely the prelude to challenging more entrenched boundaries in the mind. In my title story 'Out of Bounds', set in 2000, a wall separates a boy who lives in comfort above a formerly Indian area that now has its first black African residents. As destitute squatters build their shacks closer up the hill, the boy's dad builds a wall and tops it with curling barbed wire - the modern day equivalent, perhaps, of growing an almond hedge - but when he develops a friendship with a squatter girl, he is forced to open his mind.

In our fractured, volatile world with its dehumanising wars and conflicts, walls reveal a poverty of imagination. We need to have the courage of both young Solani from the squatter camp and Rohan from within his security fence. As a fiction writer, I don't have solutions for the mess into which unrestrained greed, power and violence have led us. But I do know that resorting to more gated communities, higher walls, and reliance on force and arms, does not ensure safety. Without imagination – and the ability to imagine each other – we are all brutalised and lose essential attributes of our humanity. I hope my stories are a small contribution to that process of engaging imagination and making a journey across the fence.

*This is a shortened version of the talk given at the 29<sup>th</sup> IBBY Congress in Cape Town South Africa on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2004*

*Beverley Naidoo has written eleven novels and picture books as well as editing several anthologies and educational collections. She travels and lectures extensively, including school visits around the world.*

*Visit [www.beverleynaidoo.com](http://www.beverleynaidoo.com) for more information on her upcoming appearances.*

# Stories from the Source of the Nile: An Account of Story-Collecting in Ethiopia

*Elizabeth Laird*

Ethiopia has long been an obsession of mine, ever since I lived and worked there as a teacher in the 1960s. The beauty of the Ethiopian landscape, the charm of her straightforward, sensitive people and the fascination of her unique ancient culture caught my imagination in a way that no other country has done since. Revolution, war and famine gripped Ethiopia in the decades after I left, and their legacy lingers still. Ethiopia was spared nothing. But in the last few years, a stable government has begun to bring about change. The problems are vast and the threat of famine ever-present, but the economy is growing, a civil society is slowly emerging. There are signs of hope everywhere.

I returned to Ethiopia in 1996, after an absence of nearly 30 years, and the old spell wove its magic again. Inspired by a chance encounter with an old man on a mountain (who told me a story about an ant), I made a proposal to the British Council which I hardly dared hope they would consider. My idea was to travel the length of breadth of Ethiopia, visiting as many as possible of the different ethnic groups, in order to collect some of their rich treasuries of folk stories. I would then rewrite the stories in simplified English, and publish them in Readers suitable for primary schoolchildren. Between us, the British Council and I would produce one or two books for each of the fourteen regions of Ethiopia. In this way, Oromo children would learn English using their own Oromo stories, Nuer children would read Nuer stories, Afar children, Afar stories, and so on. A secondary aim was to publish as many of these stories as possible for native speakers of English in Europe and America, in order to showcase this unknown aspect of Ethiopian culture. I was delighted and astounded when the British Council director in Addis Ababa, Michael Sargent, took up the idea with enthusiasm.

I didn't know at that time what riches I would uncover, though I had some knowledge of the wealth of the country's ancient culture. Ethiopia claims to be the oldest Christian country in the world. The Ethiopians are Copts, and over centuries of isolation, their branch of Christianity developed in a unique way, preserving extremely ancient rituals and Judaic practices. At the same time, many parts of Ethiopia have strong Islamic traditions, while in the remoter regions older religious beliefs and practices of different kinds still hold sway. The visible signs of Ethiopia's fascinating history are evident in her unique, centuries-old

rock-hewn churches, her seventeenth century palaces, her extraordinary fresco art and manuscript paintings: But her less tangible heritage of myth, legend and folk story is much less well known..

This is how the project worked. Ethiopia is divided into fourteen administrative regions, each with its own strong local governing body. Each region has its own Cultural Bureau, run by a Regional Cultural Officer. The British Council would contact the Cultural Officer in the Region I was about to visit, and he or she would assemble storytellers, arrange for local translators (there are more than seventy-five languages in Ethiopia) and oversee all the practical arrangements. Without exception, in every region, the officials concerned entered into the project with great enthusiasm. There were often complications. Many narrators whose mother tongues were minority languages such as Anuak, Haderinya or Afarinya, could not speak Amharic, the lingua franca of Ethiopia. It was often necessary for their stories to be translated first into Amharic, before they could be rendered into English.

The stories were taped, first in the mother tongue, and then often in the Amharic translation. I would work on them with the Amharic translator. After the trip was over, I would rewrite the stories in carefully graded English, so that they were easy enough for new, young readers to understand. The stories would then be returned to the regions for the story tellers to check and approve. The series illustrator (Yosef Kebede, a talented artist from Addis Ababa), would work on the internal artwork, while an illustrator from the region would create the cover. The design and layouts were done in Britain, and the printing was done in Ethiopia. Once finished, the books were returned to the regions for distribution to the schools. Up to date, nine books have been produced, and eight more are in the pipeline.

This complex joint venture was truly experimental. There is little experience of publishing children's books in Ethiopia, except for school textbooks, which are centrally produced and distributed by the Ministry of Education. Our books were not part of the government-funded curriculum, but supplementary support materials open to a wider readership. Producing these books has been a new experience for everyone involved. There was a serious hiccup over the question of copyright. Ethiopians are rightly wary of

allowing their heritage to be 'patented' by outsiders. At the same time, it was important to establish the concept of copyright, without which no publishing industry can work, and to protect the author, illustrators and producers of the books. No copyright can apply to the stories themselves, as they are in the public domain, and are the property of the Ethiopian people. They can be retold in any version by anyone. The actual words and pictures used in the books remain of course the copyright of the author and artists.

It's impossible, in a short article, to convey any sense of the excitement of those extraordinary journeys, the often slow and difficult expeditions across the vast, magnificent landscape, the thrill of meeting the story tellers, their growing confidence, and the constant surprise and delight in the stories as they unfolded. Some sessions took place in the cool, windswept highlands. The story teller might be a farmer, a merchant, a school teacher, a deacon, a government official, a Coptic nun, or a priest, and once even the hereditary bard to the long defunct royal house of Bonga in the south west. There were several sessions in the hot town of Assayita in the Danakil region, while the camel market proceeded outside, and the story tellers refreshed themselves with 'chat', a stimulating herb. In Gambella, in the steamy south west, our first session was held in the prison, and the second under the mango trees by the banks of the Baro river. Stories were told on the shores of Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, in towns and villages, homes, schools, offices, under shady trees, or round smoky, incense-scented fires.

There is a perception in the west that folk stories were created for children, and that children are their primary audience. This has only been the case since they were written down, and ceased to be part of an oral tradition. Some tales, of course, are clearly 'teaching' stories, with a clear aim: to impart good manners, to provide moral examples, to advise, or to warn. These are obviously aimed at children. But stories in Ethiopia are usually told by adults to adults, and enjoyed by everyone. It's sad that in the west, adults no longer listen to and enjoy traditional stories, as many of them have profound and eternal meanings. In many European homes, even the Bible is undergoing the same process of infantilisation. The profound and horrifying story of Noah, for example, is treated as primarily a children's story, and often sanitised in the telling, while a Noah's Ark is a popular child's toy.

In Ethiopia, adults still 'own' their stories, and often, after a story session, there is a discussion on the story's meaning which can

range widely over questions of morality, politics, history and philosophy. Sadly, this practice is in decline. Increasing literacy, the introduction of radio and, most damagingly of all, television, inevitably sound the death knell to a vibrant oral tradition. Already, young people are ignorant of their grandparents' treasures of stories. The memories of literate people are short.

Rich oral folk canons exist (or once existed) in many parts of the world, but Ethiopia must have one of the most fascinating. The country is a patchwork of different languages, cultures and religions. It lies on the crossroads between Africa and the Middle East. Its early kingdom of Axum formed the farthest limit of the ancient world known to the Greeks, Egyptians and Romans. In the third century CE, the Persian prophet Mani named Axum as one of the four great kingdoms of the earth, along with Babylon/Persia, Rome and China. It's no wonder that some of the stories I was told echo Aesop, others have extraordinary resonances with the Old Testament, while still others mirror fairy stories familiar to us from European collections, or from the Arabian Nights of old Baghdad.

As well as this long indigenous history, there has been the constant cultural refreshment brought by the trade routes that criss-cross the country. Salt has for millenia been mined in the Danakil region in the east, and transported across the highlands to the Sudan and beyond as far west as Timbuktoo. Coffee, which originated in the south east of Ethiopia, has been exported since time immemorial. Incense, hides and honey have long travelled down these ancient roads. At the same time, given the rugged geography of this vast land, there are many peoples in the remoter regions who have been almost untouched by influences from beyond their own small ethnic groups. Their stories are often unusual and intriguing.

Gradually, as my cassettes and notebooks filled with stories, I began to see how they might be classified. This, I must confess, is where a training as a folklorist would have been invaluable. Instead, I used my own rule of thumb: a rough and ready system. The many creation stories I was told were probably among my favourites. They had a 'Just-So Stories' feel about them, and are common throughout Africa. They might describe, for example, how the tortoise got her shell, or how God differentiated between the species he had created. Origin myths are similarly fascinating. They usually describe the founding of a particular ethnic group, or kingly family and are

# Writing for Children and Young People in Africa

*Meshack Asare, panel judge and author*

*The **Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa**, sponsored by Macmillan Education, aims to encourage and promote the very best in contemporary African Children's Literature. The prize is unique in that it is only awarded for unpublished writing, in the knowledge that for writers across the continent, access to established publishing houses is often difficult. The Prize is awarded on a biennial basis by an independent panel of judges, which includes authors of distinction in the fields of children's and adult literature.*

*Macmillan Education has been publishing books for and about Africa for over 40 years. They have a broad range of Readers, both fiction and non-fiction, for children, teenagers and young adults. Many of the Readers focus on relevant social issues, such as HIV/AIDS, the Environment, Health, Gender and Peace and Reconciliation. Mostly however, they hope that young readers will develop confidence and enthusiasm for reading.*

One feature of African writing that also gives it its distinct character and robustness, is its preoccupation and engagement with issues that irk African communities. Perhaps this is not surprising, having evolved as it often did, within the colonial experience and having been nurtured in environments of nation building, with the consequent substantial measures of nationalism and cultural re-assertion that sometimes generate potentially dangerous divisions among people. The immediate challenge that confronts the African writer, then, is how to be free from the strictures that such conditions impose.

One does not need to go to great lengths to show the effects of volatile politics, poor economic and fiscal conditions, language and commercial barriers, poverty, ignorance, etc. These are conditions that African writers witness and experience too, and it is perhaps the greatest challenge not merely to become observers, but to fashion out of these conditions, writing that can stand among the literatures of the world because it has recognisable value. This challenge is especially evident in writing for children and young people, where balancing learning, sensitivity and correctness with entertainment and pleasure is a universal concern. How do writers deal with often harrowing realities and create children's stories within this genre which in Africa is in fact only decades old?

The wide range of new writing ignited by the recently established **Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa** gives a fair insight into this process. Often, difficult and disturbing issues arise. We witness the determination of a young girl to escape from a life of exploitation and abuse as a market carrier, we enter into families troubled by violence, loss or conflicts of belief, or the lives of displaced or orphaned children who are struggling to care for each other. Nevertheless, the most successful and accomplished of these stories focus on life as it is lived and experienced around Africa today. Furthermore, they all centre on children and young people, properly situating them in traditions, systems and conditions that are then seen and experienced from the young characters' standpoints, so that we have the opportunity to witness their responses.

There are two remarkable indications here. In the course of developing children's and young people's writing, the tendency has been to fit children into adult situations simply like miniatures of some sort, with no points of view of their own. This tendency was very evident in African writing for years. We were only able to impose and prescribe adult perspectives and experiences in our writing. And due to the predominance of textbook publishing, our writing needed to be 'educative' rather than just for pleasure. But now, in the best writing for this young audience, the experiences and responses are the child-characters' own, as the writers become more aware and sympathetic to the needs and preferences of their young readers. Now, for example, these readers have young characters with whom they can identify, or at times disagree.

The other important indication is the departure from the days when every other African book for children and young people derived from existing folktale or something not too far from it. In this field of literature, such a move should be taken as a sign that finally, we are truly writing for children and young people. It is the stage where our fascination with our 'cultural identity' wears off and gives way to looking at our more immediate condition in the real world. We are ready to really explore and create, even perhaps, create daring new worlds.

By its choice of subject matter at this stage, African writing in this genre may differ from its counterparts in Europe and America, if not Asia as well. However, I am sure that soon

# Who Owns the Bones?

*Dianne Hofmeyr*

When Sara Baartman arrived home from Paris to find her resting place in Cape Town, after an absence of nearly 200 years, it was an occasion to be celebrated. After sustained pressure from South Africa, a contentious issue had finally been resolved. The French Senate had voted overwhelmingly to repatriate her remains.

Sara's story throws uncomfortable issues of racism, sexism and colonialism into sharp relief. While working as a domestic servant in Cape Town, she was persuaded by a visiting English surgeon to accompany him to England. Billed as the 'Hottentot Venus,' she was paraded as a curiosity at gatherings and fairs, until finally she was exhibited by an animal trainer as part of a travelling circus in France. When she died at age 25, a plaster cast was made of her body and some of her organs were preserved in formaldehyde. These, together with her bones, were put on display in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris where they remained for 187 years.

Holding hostage the bones and artefacts of one culture by another is fraught with nuances of greed and paternalism. It triggers complex emotions of hurt and distrust. The concept of a heritage 'stolen' is underpinned by the belief that ancestral spirits cannot rest until their bones are laid in their native ground. As recently as July this year, members of the Dja Dja Wurrung tribe seized the earliest surviving aboriginal bark etchings while they were on loan to the Museum of Victoria in Melbourne from the British Museum and Kew Gardens. This raises the question of who owns cultural artefacts. If the fragile bark etchings had not been preserved by the British Museum, they would no longer exist. But according to aboriginal belief, the very ephemeral nature of the etchings is the whole point - they should return to the Australian dust where they spiritually belong.

In *The Spectator* (7.9.02), Tiffany Jenkins questions who should have right of access to sacred objects. 'The idea that one group of people has a greater connection to and understanding of historical artefacts than another reduces knowledge or inquiry to irrational intuitions which are non-verifiable, non-testable and certainly not communicable. Without information there can be no shared ideas or exploration of other cultures.' Jenkins asserts that if sacred objects cannot be examined and as much knowledge as possible derived from them, prejudice cannot be confronted.

The question of who owns story is equally complex. Should the stories from one culture be told by another? The argument rages back and forth. An editorial entitled 'Varied Carols' from as far back as the March/April 1993 issue of *Horn Book* evoked mixed but compelling responses. One author expressed her hope that publishers might hold back on bringing out a work about children of a different culture by a writer not of that culture, unless the book was so uniquely compelling that its publication could not be denied.

Artist Pippa Skotnes caused a furore when she created an art installation entitled 'Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan history and material culture' by using resin facsimiles of the original plaster casts from a dismantled exhibition of the 'Bushmen' people in the Cape Town Museum. She defended herself by saying she was bringing to light and attempting to communicate the story of human tragedy tied up in the exploitation and final extermination of the Bushmen/San people.

Yvette Abrahams from the Department of History at the University of Cape Town, said of 'Miscast' that 'it was a sign that colonialism was far from over. It indicated that the power to construct hegemonic social knowledge about Brown people remained in white hands.' Skotnes's counter to this was to question who has the right to represent or interpret evidence: 'All of us, surely, or none of us. But each of us must be judged on the merits of our own work and its ability to acknowledge and address the traditions with all their gross inequalities.'

Sara Baartman may now be laid to rest in her home soil, but clearly the dilemma of 'who owns the bones?' of story, is not yet laid to rest. Perhaps the answer to the question lies simply in the words of Flannery O'Connor: 'We find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life.'

*Dianne Hofmeyr has been awarded two IBBY Honour Books, most recently for her book, **The Waterbearer**. Her next book, **Fish Notes**, due out in 2005, touches on the story of Sara Baartman and the Khoi people*

## Being Accurate in Depicting Africa: a conversation between Eileen Browne and Pat Pinsent

These stories, set in south-west Kenya, are about two little girls from the Luo tribe, Handa and her friend Akeyo. In *Handa's Surprise*, Handa is taking Akeyo some fruit, carried in a basket on her head. A variety of animals steal the fruit, but before she reaches her friend, an escaping goat knocks into a tree and fills the basket with tangerines, which turn out to be Akeyo's favourite fruit. In *Handa's Hen*, the girls find an array of different creatures, while looking for a missing hen.)

*Pat: Eileen, I understand that you've never been to Africa. Why did you choose to produce a book set there?*

Eileen: The inspiration for it was really a visual one. I saw a TV comedy in which Steve Martin pretended to be interviewed sitting in the garden, and with a fountain behind him that looked as if it was coming out of the top of his head. It occurred to me that it would be interesting to produce a picture book in which a character was carrying something on their head and could not see what was happening to it. This 'something' became a basket of fruit, with tall animals stealing fruit from it. This meant I needed a place where tall animals, especially giraffes, live. So it had to be Africa. I designed it as a wordless picture book, but the publishers said that would be too demanding for adults 'reading' the story to young children at bed-time, as they'd have to make up the text. So I had to provide words too. I didn't really want to set it in Africa at first, as I realised I'd have to do loads of research!

*P: How did you decide where in Africa to set the book?*

E: I needed to find somewhere with giraffes and other animals, big game, where there were also villages. Animals like that would only be in National Parks, most of which didn't have villages in them, but I found that there were suitable settings in Kenya and South Africa. It was during the apartheid period, so I chose Kenya. Then I had to find the appropriate area, and discover what the animals and plants were like.

*P: How did you set about doing the research for the book?*

E: The best research help I received was from two Kikuyu women at the Kenya tourist office in London. They immediately said about the little girl, 'She can't be Kikuyu because we don't carry baskets that way. But she could be Luo.' I got good advice from them about the villages, the clothes and the hair styles of the Luo people, which they, in turn, got by phoning their Luo friend at the Kenya High Commission. I also received help from the Kenya agricultural office about the fruit and the trees. For *Handa's Hen* I needed a flowering tree which sunbirds would feed from. The flame-tree suggested was ideal. I got information from libraries, zoos, safari parks and photo resource centres. I was given very helpful comments about the MS from a writers' workshop in North London, where there were several people of African and Caribbean descent, and two Nigerian parents at my son's school gave me lots of handy hints.

*P: You wanted to make quite sure all the details were right?*

E: Yes, it's very important to me that these books weren't vague but were set in a specific place. All the fruits, animals and insects are found in south-west Kenya's grasslands.

*P: You haven't been to Africa since producing *Handa's Surprise*?*

E: No, but if I do a third in the series, I will try to go to Kenya.

*P: Hasn't anyone given you an invitation to go there?*

E: Not recently!

*P: *Handa's Surprise* was very positively received, wasn't it?*

E: Yes, it got good reviews.

*P: Has it been published in other countries?*

E: Yes – when it was published in South Africa, I was worried about the fact that they wanted to remove the information saying where it was set. So I asked the opinion of a Tsonga woman at the South African Tourism Board. She said that although it couldn't be in her area, the setting seemed very similar to the Kruger National Park in North Transvaal and she thought it would be OK. The South African names chosen for Handa and Akeyo were excellent: Senzeni,

which means ‘how could this happen to me?’ and Nikiwe, ‘receiver of gifts.’ And only this week I have received details of new editions produced by Giraffe Books (Pan Macmillan) in 11 South African languages, which I’m told acknowledge the story’s setting.

*P: It’s important to you to be accurate about places?*

E: Yes. I get annoyed about books that are from different cultures and don’t say where they are set.

*P: Once I was talking about **Handa’s Surprise** to a group of MA students and one said she felt that Handa looked rather stupid by not realising that the fruit had been stolen and then a different fruit put in its place. Has anyone ever said that to you?*

E: No. Whilst working on the story, I asked many people if they thought she looked stupid. They didn’t because, if you look carefully at the pictures, you will see changes in Handa’s facial expressions and arm movements. When the ostrich takes the guava, her eyes look backwards, and when the giraffe takes the pineapple she grabs hold of the basket. She looks unhappy when she realises the basket is empty, but cheers up as it gets heavy again. She knows something is going on but can’t see what it is.

*P: Another comment I’ve heard sometimes is about the resemblance to Pat Hutchins’ **Rosie’s Walk** (1969), where the hen keeps eluding the fox and we’re never quite sure whether it’s deliberate when the fox lands up being chased by a swarm of bees. Do you think you were influenced by that book?*

E: Not consciously. I love the concept of the reader seeing what is happening while the people in the picture can’t. I think **Rosie’s Walk** is brilliant.

*P: You also illustrated three books about a little girl called Jo, with a white father and a black mother.*

E: Yes, **Through my Window** (1986), **Wait and See** (1988) and **In a Minute** (1990). That was when I was living in North London, so the setting is based on that locality. They’re out of print now, but I’d very much like to see them back in print.

*P: Thank you very much Eileen. I will be looking out for more books about Handa!*

**Little Angel Theatre** is currently touring a delightful interactive adaptation of **Handa’s Surprise** in central and south London until early November. See [www.littleangeltheatre.com](http://www.littleangeltheatre.com) for details.

*Just a few of the events and organisations supporting African children’s literature and writing include:*

**The Polka Theatre** in Wimbledon is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and offering a varied programme, including a performance of *The Playground* by Beverley Naidoo from 23<sup>rd</sup> September to 30<sup>th</sup> October, as a celebration of ten years of democracy in South Africa. See [www.polkatheatre.com](http://www.polkatheatre.com) for details.

Information about a range of **African writers** may be found on the website: [africanwritersabroad@yahoo.com](mailto:africanwritersabroad@yahoo.com)

**IllusAfrica**, located in Belgium, is an organisation with the aim of opening up new prospects for creative artists on the African continent. It attempts to foster the development of children’s literature in Africa by running workshops with the intention of sharing expertise. Contact [illusafrica@yahoo.com](mailto:illusafrica@yahoo.com) for information.

*Like to see your organisation or even promoted in IBBYlink? Please contact us to find out more information on events and promotion!*

# Go, Africa!

*Pat Thompson*

When I was a child, I remember being impressed by the shape and size of Africa on the maps and the tales of exotic animals. It seemed unlikely that I should ever know of anyone who had actually been there. Many years on, Africa is still a great shape, the animals are still amazing and I have been able to go there. My visit was astonishing and moving by turns.

Under the auspices of the legendary Jay Heale, I spoke at a conference at the University of the Western Cape. The subject was literacy and, as such, there was a mixture of educators and book people. Not, of course, that these groups are mutually exclusive. As an academic librarian who also writes for children, I feel comfortable in this borderland and was speaking about how I use my books on school visits to persuade children to write as well as read. As I listened to the other speakers, I could have been sitting in a School of Education meeting in the United Kingdom. The same problems came up: resources: never enough although the demands increase; publishing market-led in a way that cannot always give education what it wants. What was different was the scale and starting point. We had all had directives from our various governments to flood the schools with IT provision.

In Africa, the problems not only encompassed computers but possibly the electricity supply too. We all required books to support literacy for the most needy groups but there was a significant difference. In the United Kingdom, it has been largely left to small independent publishers to tackle the task of publishing in languages which cannot command a big market. In South Africa, there are eleven official languages and, inevitably, some of these languages belong to the groups least able to support the market. As we listened and talked, Africa seemed nearer, less the exotic Africa of my childhood and much more like home. Understanding these problems and what one had to do to try and solve them in the UK, my respect for my African colleagues grew.

It was a matter of luck that I had mentioned my visit to my agent, Laura Cecil. I learned that she was also agent to a South African illustrator, Niki Daly and we got in touch. What followed was a meeting with a man whose professional integrity and sense of his country's history is moving; through him, I received an insight into South Africa that would not otherwise been possible. Niki is perhaps

best known in this country as the author/illustrator of the *Jamela* books. For librarians seeking books for all our multiethnic readers, the illustrations of black children have often been disappointing, but here was an illustrator who could draw and showed us real children in real settings. Later, I discovered that his wide range includes a sensitive approach to the art of the San people, whose rock paintings inspired his book *The Dancer*.

Niki invited me to accompany him on his visits and we did some story telling together. I met a village class in a local library. The library was well stocked and the children enthusiastic. Watching the children's faces, I could have been anywhere where there are storytellers and listeners. We also visited a school where we met the same enthusiasm but the classroom was completely bare. The children themselves do have something to give, however. The nice thing about story telling in Africa is that if you tell a story, you are likely to get one back!

Then it was a drive up a rough hillside to a squatter camp. There was only one solid building. I cannot tell you how humbled I felt to find that the inhabitants had been given a choice and had chosen to have a library. On my return, with the generous help of the Federation of Children's Book Groups, the library stock received a boost. It was the least an outsider could do in the face of such faith in the power of books.

Throughout my stay, I had been almost startled by the respect paid to books and education. In the UK, I had become, in some arenas, used to fighting indifference in the context of what are perceived as higher priorities elsewhere. The other impression which stays with me is of the things I had previously only known through Niki Daly's evocative artwork: the colour, the vitality, the beautiful landscape and the fun and friendliness of the people.

Telling the story of my visit to a group of English children, I know exactly how they felt. After a long pause, one child said simply, 'Go Africa!'

IBBY's Executive Director, Kimete Basha, has decided not to continue in the post. As an interim measure, it has been decided to appoint a Director of Communications and Project Development instead of immediately seeking a new Executive Director. Liz Page will continue as Administrative Director, based in Basel. It is likely that an announcement will be made in the near future about an appointment to the new post.

**Romania Joins IBBY!** The Cultural and Educational Publishing Houses Association (AEPC), which brings together 38 publishing houses dealing mainly with children's books and books for teenagers, is the main body now responsible for IBBY Romania. The AEPC, which organizes an annual bookfair for children and teenagers with the support of UNESCO, plans to coordinate efforts in Romania to develop reading and literacy programmes and to encourage the publication and the translation of books by Romanian authors and illustrators. It hopes to build strong partnerships with other IBBY National Sections and to disseminate information about IBBY initiatives amongst editors, authors, publishers, bookshops, teachers and librarians in Romania.

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*CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4 - STORY-COLLECTING IN ETHIOPIA - E. Laird*

often highly original. Animal fables, echoing those of La Fontaine or Aesop, abound. The cunning fox, the tyrannical lion, the tricky monkey and the untrustworthy hyena occur again and again. These stories are usually the vehicle for simple moral teaching, and are widely reproduced in school textbooks. Inheritance stories have overt moral messages too. The format is always the same, but I came across a great number of variants. The story begins with the dying father explaining to his three sons how his property is to be divided between them. In the process of doing this, they learn valuable lessons.

Many stories feature magical characters, such as ogres, witches, jinns, wizards and werereatures. In the Muslim east, jinns are common. In the steamy south west, there are cannibalistic ogres. Were-hyenas are to be found everywhere, as are river demons. In Gondar, there is a particular tradition of magicians who have the evil eye and can turn their victims into zombies. Some of these stories bear striking resemblances to European fairy tales. I encountered versions of Hansel and Gretel, for example, all over Ethiopia. I came across many story cycles where the main, recurring, character is a cunning trickster. Elsewhere in Africa, the Anansi stories are very well known. In Ethiopia, I met Aleke Gebre Hanna in the Central Highlands, Hirsi and Kabaalaf in the eastern Somali lowlands, and Abu Nawas and Nasreddin in Muslim Harar. A delightful new cycle centres on the antics of a foolish communist official in the time of the previous Stalinist regime under Mengistu Haile Mariam. Another recurring character is the clever woman. These stories often show how an intelligent wife rescues a foolish husband from the consequences of his actions, or frustrates the unwanted attentions of a would-be adulterous suitor.

Some stories were so profound and unsettling that they didn't fit comfortably in my rather ad hoc categories. I lumped these together in my mind under the catch-all heading 'philosophy'. These

*CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6 - MACMILLAN WRITER'S PRIZE - M. Asare*

our writers too will be delving more into the inner mind and heart for stories about feelings and fantasy. Our mind and imagination will fly and dream more freely with confidence and strive to offer other perspectives on life and self to the child and young reader. The ideas are there. Where else on earth is a bungling regional angel sent down from the sky to sort out a community that had forgotten how to laugh? Even rain-soaked mud turns into dream mansions and gleaming new cars in Soweto. And is there any other place where one could learn that Pula means rain? After all, this is the continent of the griots, *Anansesem* and where horn-sharp minds craft riddles for pleasure! The genes of storytelling still sizzle in the veins of our writers. I believe that in time, African writers will re-visit their immensely rich traditions of fantasy and storytelling and find new and original ways to use those resources.

These, I think, are the next big challenges, especially for our writers for children and young people. Having noted the progress so far, especially in the late developing sector for children and young people, the truth still remains that in a world now virtually open from one corner to the other, African writers too must succeed in a world-wide marketplace. Maybe our biggest challenge of all is the removal of barriers that might be in the way, starting with the ones in our own minds.

# CONFERENCES & EVENTS

13 November 2004, University of Surrey, Roehampton

## **EAST MEETS WEST IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

The annual NCRCL/British IBBY Children's Literature conference. Speakers include Uli Knoepfmacher, Farrukh Dhondy and a panel of authors, together with a range of workshops and the celebration of Diana Wynne Jones' 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday. Contact Laura Atkins ([L.Atkins@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:L.Atkins@roehampton.ac.uk)); NCRCL, Froebel College, Roehampton University, Roehampton Lane, SW15 5PJ; 020 8392 3008)

29 Nov - 4 Dec, Derbyshire

## **CHILDREN AS READERS**

This exciting seminar will focus on how library services help young people to discover the pleasures of literature. Full details can be found at [www.britishcouncil.org/seminars-information-0475.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/seminars-information-0475.htm). Email [yellowteam.seminars@britishcouncil.org](mailto:yellowteam.seminars@britishcouncil.org) or contact British Council seminars, 1 Beaumont Place, Oxford, OX1 2PJ; 01865 302720

## **PUBLICATIONS/PUBLISHING NEWS**

*Bookbird*, the journal of International IBBY, has devoted its July 2004 issue to Children's Literature and Africa, in conjunction with the IBBY Congress held in Cape Town in September 2004. Articles include one by Jane Kurtz, an American author who has associations with Ethiopia. In her description of her recent experiences there and in Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, she highlights the similarity between the concerns of African and American librarians and others about both children's reading and the economic difficulties which curtail the publishing of books about life in Africa. Cécile Lebon provides an informative survey of French-language African novels for young people, which she shows to be a relatively new genre, with what she describes as 'a very thin frontier' separating the books from folktales. A valuable section also features a number of novels and picture books from and about Africa,

The centenary edition of J.M.Barrie's *Peter Pan and Wendy* was launched on the appropriate venue of the ancient vessel, the *Golden Hinde* by Templar Publishing, who have also recently produced a very attractive edition of *Aesop's Fables*, retold and illustrated by Helen Ward. See [www.templars.co.uk](http://www.templars.co.uk) for more information.

The most recent issues of *Booktrusted*, the journal produced by the Booktrust, are devoted to Crossover Books (No.8) and to Sport (No.9). As well as a range of reviews, there are features on Sonya Hartnett and Lian Hearn (in 8), and Jennifer Donnelly, Shirley Hughes, Rob Childs and Michael Coleman (in 9). See [www.booktrusted.com](http://www.booktrusted.com) for more information.

*Folk Tales and Fairy Tales: A Book Guide* (£5) is the latest publication from the Booktrust. Sections include include Myths and Legends as well as a list of secondary texts. To order, contact Publications, Booktrust, Book House, 45 East Hill, London, SW18 2QZ, or [publications@booktrust.org.uk](mailto:publications@booktrust.org.uk), telephone 020 8516 2984.

*Avalanche* is the working title of an Arts Council funded quarterly magazine for fiction, art, poetry and reviews by contributors aged 7 to 14. A prototype has been published – see [www.avalanche-magazine.co.uk](http://www.avalanche-magazine.co.uk), telephone 020 7561 0146, or email [info@avalanche-magazine.co.uk](mailto:info@avalanche-magazine.co.uk)

## **OTHER NEWS**

### **Astrid Lindgren Award**

Lygia Bojunga from Brazil, the 2004 winner, received the the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award at a ceremony at the Skansen Open Air Museum in Stockholm on May 26. During Lygia Bojunga's visit to Stockholm, a number of other activities were arranged, including a press conference, lectures, story sessions for school children, and visits.

**Bookaid International** has announced a three-year plan to help disadvantaged people have better access to books, and to enhance the position of libraries and their relationships with the local communities. In order to achieve their aims, they work closely with partners throughout the world. For further information, email [info@bookaid.org](mailto:info@bookaid.org), telephone 020 7733 3577 or go to [www.bookaid.org](http://www.bookaid.org)

*IBBYLink is edited by Pat Pinsent. For more information on submitting an article or sponsoring future editions, please contact her at [PatPinsent@aol.com](mailto:PatPinsent@aol.com).*