



The Other Side of Truth

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Beverley Naidoo's Carnegie Medal acceptance speech.

Known for powerful novels which brought the realities of apartheid to life for young readers in the UK (**Journey to Jo?burg, Chain of Fire**, etc), Beverley Naidoo?s poignant and highly topical novel about asylum seekers, **The Other Side of Truth** (reviewed **BfK No. 123**), is this year?s winner of the Carnegie Medal. BfK is honoured to reproduce Beverley Naidoo?s acceptance speech in which she calls for ?a more reflective and deeper approach? to exploring our common humanity. <!--break-->

I am delighted and very honoured by this award. It matters to me deeply that in acknowledging this book, you are acknowledging the existence of a submerged world of refugees in our very midst. Equally, I am honoured that you are acknowledging my particular writer?s map to provide a route into that world.

Historical amnesia

I am very aware of how Africa, the continent of my origin, has shaped so much of my writing. I was born in South Africa because my four grandparents were economic migrants. With their Russian and Cornish backgrounds, they set off from Britain one hundred and more years ago with the implicit knowledge that, whatever their fears, the colonies offered excellent prospects to Europeans with white skins and an eye for enterprise. The door was wide open and every African country entered by Europeans had something of value on offer. In South Africa the prospects were especially good, indeed worth fighting a war over ? one European tribe against another, British and Boer. I hint at that wider debt of Europe to Africa because of historical amnesia over such uncomfortable matters. Yet the fractures and pain in much of Africa today cannot be understood without examining its political inheritance. Writers have a particular responsibility not to indulge in amnesia and I want to acknowledge my own particular debt to writers from Africa who know that all individuals are umbilically connected to a wider world. There is such a thing as society ? and it matters.

In my writing, I have always aimed to reveal the impact of the wider society and its politics on the lives of my young characters. I begin *The Other Side of Truth* in Lagos just after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the writer who spoke vociferously about the despoiling of his land through the unholy alliance of multinational oil companies and Nigeria?s then military dictatorship. A current lawsuit, brought by his family in the USA, maintains Shell participated in his torture and death. My novel reflects the dangers of the time, especially for a journalist committed to speaking out the truth, like Sade and Femi?s father. Witnessing their mother killed in an assassination attack is, however, just the beginning of their trauma.

The world into which the children are thrust overnight is the submerged world of refugees in our midst. Smuggled into London, these young people ? brought up with the idea of the importance of ?telling the truth? ? are plunged into an underworld of illegality. It is a world that is largely submerged under public indifference and increasingly overt hostility, fuelled by the irresponsibility of politicians and media who are prepared to appeal to the lowest common denominator. The land of the BBC World Service - which has ruled over the children?s breakfast table in Lagos ? has

pulled up the drawbridge.

The treatment of refugees

Four years ago when I stepped in to that world, I was appalled by what I found on my detective trail. I had to imagine what I saw and heard through the eyes and ears of a child. I believe I saw only the tip of the iceberg and that since then politicians have vied with each other on how to thicken the ice. Four years ago, the so-called 'hotel' for refugees given temporary respite near Heathrow Airport felt like an army barracks. Now our politicians talk proudly of barracks. Campsfield House, where refugees are held near Oxford, is nothing like a house. It is a prison at the end of a leafy lane. The young man I visited there came from Nigeria. Coincidentally, he was a journalist, like my characters' father. The little gestures of contempt and humiliation rankled as deeply as the confinement.

Images I saw while researching constantly took me back to South Africa. The long queue forced to wait outside the gigantic Immigration and Nationality Department at Croydon brought back childhood memories of the Pass Office in Johannesburg. I had set my previous novels in my birth country in order to explore how we human beings treat each other - our capacity for evil and for good. But after the first democratic elections, I felt it was time to bring some of the issues that concerned me home to England. I say 'home' because, more than 30 years ago, this country offered me, and others close to me, a refuge. The irony was that the apartheid regime also received a good deal of support from the same British government.

Exile brought loss and disconnection. My body was here in England, but much of the time my heart and mind were in South Africa. While my feet walked and cycled freely along country lanes around York, my head was frequently inside the prisons where my brother and many others were locked away. However, as a white South African with at least one pukka British grandfather, obtaining subsequent British nationality was not difficult. So I did not experience the deep fear that hangs over so many asylum seekers - that they will be forcibly returned to the tyrannical state from which they have fled. Nor did I personally experience the racism.

Exploring our common humanity

Literature is a bridge into other worlds. It offers a route into exploring our common humanity. Yet librarians still tell me of young white people who look at book covers with black people and think that the story will have nothing to do with them. The all too frequent question 'Are all your books about black people?' reveals the racialised frame. How profoundly different to the moving question asked by a teenage girl in Palestine last year: 'Are all your books about humanity?' There is a tremendous need in this society for literature that enables young people to cross boundaries that enables them to explore issues of 'race', class and gender that John Major dismissed as a waste of time in education. How could I have begun to understand the experience of my characters without sensitivity to these very issues? Sir Herman Ouseley's report on Bradford indicates just how deeply racialised our society remains. Mr Blair and New Labour, you say you are about social change. Well, I ask you to stop paying lip-service. We need a more reflective and deeper approach.

Let me give an example. Talking about literature provides a splendid forum for discussion and deepening understanding. But this needs time for creative engagement and critical reflection. David Blunkett expresses horror at the racism mouthed by young white people. Yet he does not realise how his own prescriptions have reinforced the sidelining of education for social justice. A few lessons in citizenship will not put this right. This government's functionalist approach to the teaching of literacy is particularly insidious and damaging. It does not, for instance, think it necessary for primary teacher-trainees to engage creatively and critically with children's literature themselves. We have government-backed campaigns to promote reading at the same time that literature is being reduced to a static comprehension exercise. This is schooling not education. Unless you surprise us, Estelle Morris, we should begin to talk of the DFSE - the Department for Schooling and Employment.

In this climate, the Carnegie Shadowing scheme valiantly encourages discussion of fiction and critical, engaged reading. But I believe you are having to work against the tide. I salute librarians, teachers as well as other writers for young

people including all my companions on this wonderful shortlist. Ours is the struggle to maintain a forum in which we can all, young and old, grapple with ideas about being human on our fragile earth.

Beverley Naidoo is a writer and educationalist. **The Other Side of Truth** is published by Puffin (0 14 130476 6) at £4.99. The Carnegie Medal is awarded annually by The Library Association for 'an outstanding book for children and young people'. It was first won by Arthur Ransome in 1936 for **Pigeon Post**.



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