

# Beverley Naidoo: Daring to Tell



Towards the end of Beverley Naidoo's Carnegie-winning novel *The Other Side of Truth*, Sade and Femi's father writes them a letter from the detention centre in which he's being held. In the letter, he commends the power of stories, and then relates one himself – similar in style and spirit to Beverley's retellings in *The Great Tug of War* – about Leopard and Tortoise. It describes the latter, at the temporary mercy of the former, busily scratching and gouging the earth. Why? Leopard asks. Tortoise declares: 'From now on, anyone who comes to this place will see that some creature put up a great struggle for life here. You may eat me, but it is my struggle that shall be remembered!' Papa's letter concludes with a plea to use the power of stories to speak out against injustice. 'We must,' he writes, 'dare to tell.'

Daring to tell is something Beverley – gently spoken, determined, persuasive – has been doing for much of her life. In her stories, she dares to tell the truth about how politics affects us all, and how we – because politics is a human activity – have the power to affect politics.

"I didn't set out to be a writer," she said. Born into a white, middle-class family in Johannesburg, her parents were in the arts – Mum a theatre critic, Dad a composer – and "I always associated writing with *their* world." She came to England in 1965, aged twenty-one, studied at York University, trained to be a teacher, married a fellow South African exile, and taught primary and secondary children in London for eighteen years. ("I was," she said, "a 'corridor and cloakroom teacher'. You hear very interesting things in cloakrooms.")

"My parents were unconventional, but, nevertheless, accepted the political set-up. Which means that you then are part of the problem. 'Contradictory consciousness'," she added ruefully. "At the time of Sharpeville, I don't remember my parents even mentioning it." (On the other hand, Beverley recognises the problems overt political commitment can give rise to. In the story 'One Day, Lily, One Day', set at the time of Sharpeville, Lily reflects bitterly: 'why couldn't Mommy and Daddy be like other people who don't bother with politics and don't care if things are fair? What about me and Mark [her brother]? Don't we matter?')

"There are many things I admire about my parents. My mother was Jewish and my father Protestant, but they sent me to a Catholic school. For balance perhaps. Then, at university [Witwatersrand], I was challenged to see things anew." She spent her lunchtimes chatting and eating sandwiches with a group of students – "including black students" – on the lawn. "The conversations were far more interesting than

those going on in the canteen". She joined Kupugani, a welfare organisation to increase the amount of food available to the African population and provide basic health education, and went into Soweto.

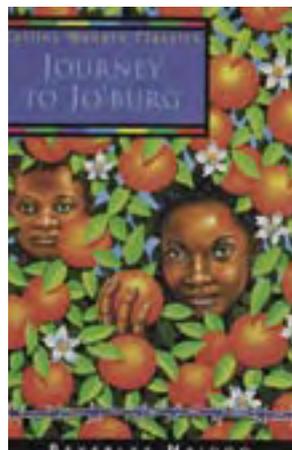
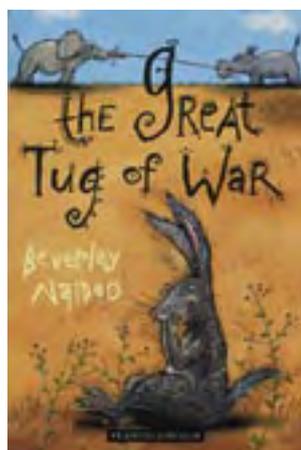
"In 1964 came the knock on the door. Mandela, etc. had been sentenced in April and the South African government set out to eradicate anti-apartheid dissent. I was small fish but, nevertheless, was detained in Pretoria for eight weeks without charge." (Her brother, "a great influence," was charged and received a heftier sentence.) "I was in solitary; but" – she confided with a grin – "it was possible to whisper. I went on hunger strike. I lasted ten days. But I was beginning to feel sorry for myself, and that's not good."

She was living in Watford, an active member of the SW Herts Anti-Apartheid group, when she wrote *Censoring Reality: An examination of books in South Africa* for the ILEA Centre for Anti-Racist Education and the Education Group of the British Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (BDAFSA). The latter was established in 1958 by Canon Collins to "aid, defend and rehabilitate victims of unjust legislation, oppressive and arbitrary procedures" and "support their families and dependants", and was therefore proscribed by the South African government.

Research for *Censoring Reality* entailed a close scrutiny of library shelves. "I was absolutely horrified by what I found there. Almost all the books committed sins of commission. *Let's Visit South Africa*, for example: everything white about South Africa, wonderful; the blacks' level of intelligence, etc., inferior." She quoted an example: "*The Kung Bushmen have a tiny brain. Their language sounds more like the chatter of baboons than the talk of men.*" And then there were the "sins of omission".

"Look at what young people were actually reading . . . The books told of the splendid flora and fauna, industries and cities, but no mention of apartheid."

In the introduction to *Out of Bounds*, her book of short stories that constitutes a history of the apartheid years and beyond, Beverley describes South Africa as 'a most beautiful land but one that has been full of barriers – real walls and those in the mind'. Failure to acknowledge the situation, therefore, could only have been



accounted a strategic act of deliberate blindness. "And as regards British society as a whole, I thought: *These* are the books that parents are happy for their children to read! The subject was much too important to ignore." In her survey she imagines "a 12-year-old girl I called 'Lena', looking at non-fiction and asking, 'Where am I in this?'"

*Censoring Reality* was published in 1985, the same year as *Journey to Jo'burg*, her first novel, a pioneering work which deftly combines compelling storytelling with unflinching insight. It recounts the double journey undertaken by Naledi and her brother Tiro, the actual, physical hike and the inner, no less arduous, trek towards an awakening as to what it really means to live under a brutally repressive, ideologically divisive regime.

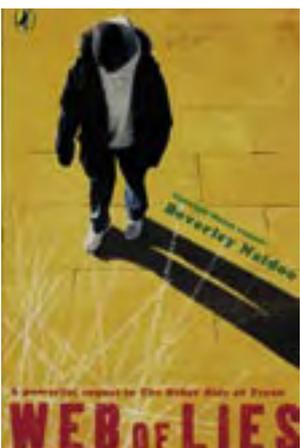
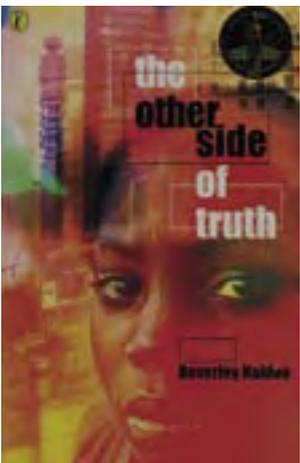
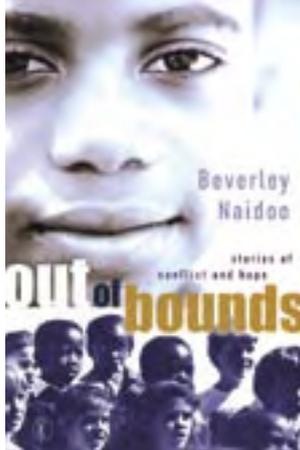
The idea for the book came from meetings of the same BDAFSA group. "We agreed that what we really needed was a work of fiction, something to touch readers' imaginations. Ethel de Keyser was encouraging children in Britain to find out more about apartheid. Could we find a writer who could open this out for young people and engage them? I had had a particular image in my head for years . . .

"It was back home, in Johannesburg. My mother, head down, typing. A telegram arrived for Mma Sebate, our cook, cleaner and nanny. She was always addressed as 'Mary'. I called her that, although all other – white – adults had to be addressed as Mr, Mrs, Uncle or Auntie." (In the book, Naledi and Tiro's mother is always 'Joyce', her employer always 'Madam'.) "The telegram said that Mary's two daughters had died of diphtheria. She collapsed in front of me." Beverley paused. "It was such a powerful image, and, all those years later, I thought, 'This is what I want to explore'."

In the afternoon quiet of her home in Bournemouth, where she lives with her husband Nandha, Beverley turned towards a painting of a black woman in a dry and dusty landscape, one of a collection of African mementoes and artefacts decorating the walls of her airy sitting-room-cum-study. "That's Mma Sebate," she said.

"When I gave them the idea, the committee being a committee asked, 'Right, when d'you think you'll have this ready?' Give me three months, I responded. I used to work from 4am to 6am, before I left for school. By December I had the outline of the story. The committee said yes, so I went away to get on with it."

Ethel de Keyser sent the completed manuscript to publishing houses; there were "lots and lots" of turndowns. Publishers seemed baffled, some advising her to re-write, to make the book more complex for adults, or to tone it down for younger readers. "My writing style – I was told – was too simple for the content. No, I said, no. Simplicity can also be complex. Race – Class – Gender – are these not a part of what we should be writing about? We don't have the answers but we should be asking the questions."



*Journey to Jo'burg* was published, first, by Longmans (it won the Other Award); then Rosemary Stones brought it out for Collins, with Lisa Kopper's illustrations adding to the book's realism. When Beverley sent copies to her nieces and nephews in South Africa the authorities confiscated the parcel. The book, she was informed by letter, was an 'UNDESIRABLE PUBLICATION'.

"I spend an ordinate amount of time on research," she said. "Then I have to let it go to the back of my mind and allow the story to work through me." Research is absorbed into plot, structure and narrative, resulting in a delicately calibrated balance of vivid storytelling and uncompromising realism. There is no room for false sentimentality or artificially upbeat endings; after all, as the title of one novel makes clear, there is *No Turning Back*. Conclusions coincide with moments of reflection, decision, transition, hope; like Sade's final, rhetorical question in *Web of Lies*: 'If you have to climb a palm tree, there's no point sitting at the bottom of the trunk, is there?'

"The characters in African writers' books," said Beverley, "are umbilically linked to their social backgrounds. 'Witness literature'. If you've experienced oppression," she explained, "it's because you're one of a group. The 'haves', on the other hand, think of themselves as individuals. It's all to do with how we're related to power in a society."

Her fictional output – novels, short stories, picture books (including one, *Baba's Gift*, written with her daughter Maya) – testifies to a continuing engagement with the African continent. A new novel, *Burn My Heart*, a story of friendship and betrayal, about a white settler boy and a Kikuyu boy in 1950s colonial Kenya during the violent end of empire, will be published next year.

Even the essentially London-based *The Other Side of Truth* and *Web of Lies* constantly hark back to Nigeria as a reference-point, persistently conjured in dreams, memories, photographs of home. The Solaja family's sense of displacement, the sharp contrasts between now and then ('*Over there, our family was like a branch of a giant tree,*' Sade writes in her journal), add layers of complexity, humanity and empathy to the characters in this fine duo of novels. And it's hardly surprising that the young admirer who wrote to Beverley saying how much of himself he recognised in Femi in *Web of Lies*, should have wondered how on earth she could have known so much about him.

Chris Stephenson

**Beverley Naidoo's most recent fiction:**

*The Other Side of Truth* Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 0 14 130476 6

*Web of Lies* Puffin £4.99 ISBN: 0-14 131466 4

*Baba's Gift* (with Maya Naidoo; illustrated by Karin Littlewood) Puffin £5.99 ISBN: 0 141 56874 3

*The Great Tug of War and other stories* Frances Lincoln £4.99 ISBN: 1 84507 055 0