

Tuesday 2nd March

LO: Comprehension

Interview with Beverley Naidoo

Why have you set so many novels and short stories in South Africa?

It is where I spent my childhood. For a long time South Africa was a very sick society. No justice, no equality, no democracy. Only white people had power and they made everything depend on skin colour. My father migrated from Cornwall in England when the tin mines were closing and gold was discovered in South Africa in the 1880s. My mother's family fled from the pogroms against Jews in Russia to England from where her parents migrated to South Africa. All my grandparents immediately had more rights than black people whose ancestors had been living there for generations. I was brought up accepting the way things were. As a child I never questioned why I could live with my parents in a comfortable home, go to school, play in the park and do all sorts of things black children were not free to do. My upbringing led me to believe that white people were superior and it was natural for them to have the best of everything. But when I realised how false this was, I became very angry at all the injustice around me - and how I was part of it. I had been brought up with blinkers. Later, when I began to write, I wanted to write stories that would challenge narrow ways of seeing.

What made you change your own ways of seeing?

Luckily when I went to university, I met people who challenged me to open my eyes. It was the early 1960s when the African National Congress was banned and Nelson Mandela went 'underground' before he was captured. I became involved in resistance to apartheid which taught me a lot. Eight weeks of solitary confinement in jail, when I was twenty one, gave me a sense of how the country was a giant jail for most of its people. I was still a very 'small fish' at the time of my arrest. But I was very aware of the enormous commitment of many people who risked long sentences and even death for their beliefs.

What gave you the idea for the storyline of Journey to Jo'burg?

As a white child in South Africa I had, as it were, two mothers. My second mother was a black cook-nanny who saw that I was washed and fed and was always around to talk with me when my own mother was busy. Yet I was brought up to see her as a servant and to call her 'Mary'. While all white adults had to be addressed as either 'Mr' or 'Mrs' or 'Aunty' or 'Uncle', I was brought up calling all black adults by their first names, which was extremely rude. Traditionally in African society respect is also conveyed through language. That is why, in Journey to Jo'burg Naledi and Tiro call anyone older 'Mma' or 'Rra'. As a child I also simply accepted that the person who looked after me ate her food off a tin plate and that her own three children lived far away. I never really thought what it must be like for them to be without their mother. One day she got a telegram and collapsed in front of me. Two of her small daughters had got diphtheria and died. I remember being sad and shocked - but I still didn't ask WHY? I could not have caught diphtheria because as a white child I had been inoculated. It was only some years later that I began to ask the important questions. Journey to Jo'burg is dedicated to the memory of those two young children and their mother. When I was writing, I wanted to explore for myself what it would be like to be separated from your mother when you most needed her. I also wanted to feel in touch with the courage of young black people in South Africa who were determined not to put up with racism and apartheid any longer.

Why was Journey to Jo'burg banned in South Africa?



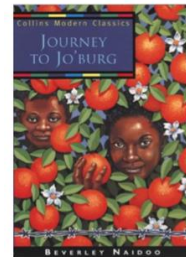
I can only guess because the government didn't give any reasons. One likely reason was that that half of the book's royalties were going to a banned organisation, the British Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, that was helping the families of political prisoners. Perhaps another reason was that the apartheid government thought it would encourage readers to ask challenging questions - especially young white South Africans who were being brought up to think that racism and discrimination were normal.

What were your feelings about South Africa's first democratic elections?

I was very excited that South Africa would get rid of the old racist laws and that Nelson Mandela would be the first democratic President. But getting equality and justice is much harder than changing the laws and there are still enormous differences between rich and poor. In 'No Turning Back' I wrote about a twelve year old boy who runs away to the dangerous streets of Jo'burg where he joins the malunde - streetchildren who live rough and survive, if they are lucky, by their wits. Sipho's stepfather is unemployed, drinks and is violent. I wanted to show that there are no magic wands.

Is what you write true?

Fiction is a very good way of exploring reality, especially different viewpoints. I tend to do a lot of research before I create a story and characters that are fictional. So my stories are true in the sense that everything that happens could happen. That was why at the beginning of **Journey to Jo'burg** there are two press cuttings about real children who made incredible journeys to find their mothers.



Retrieval

1. Where had Beverley's mother and father come from ?
2. How long did she spend in solitary confinement in jail ?

Word in context

3. Find and copy a word which means 'unfair treatment of one particular person or group of people'.

Inference

4. What does Beverley mean when she says 'fiction is a good way of exploring reality'.
5. How did Beverley feel about her upbringing and how has that made her the person she is today ?