



AN INTERVIEW WITH

## NAOMI BENARON

AUTHOR OF

# Love Letters

## FROM A FAT MAN

BY SANDRA MEYER



ISBN 1-886157-60-6, \$16.95, 265 pages, trade paper

BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 5101 Rockhill Road, Kansas City, MO 64110, (816)235-2558, [www.umkc.edu/bkmc](http://www.umkc.edu/bkmc)

*What sparked your interest in writing's potential for depicting injustice?*

My mother brought me up to fight injustice. She was quite a fighter herself. I think this is one of the reasons I have been drawn to both fiction and poetry—to speak out. I have always believed that both the act of reading and writing should leave a person changed. I would consider my work incomplete if it did not engage the reader to think and challenge her or his beliefs.

*What did you read as a child? What works most impressed you?*

I read some translations of German books—*Emil and the Detectives* or something. I loved the *Narnia Chronicles*, *Charlotte's Web*, every horse book I could get my hands on, the *Child's Encyclopedia Britannica*, Nancy Drew—typical stuff. And I was fascinated by the gross pictures of diseased people in my parents' medical books. Still am.

*Who and what works do you enjoy reading now that you're an adult?*

I think this is a list that changes daily. *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Adichie (just won the Orange Prize!), *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala, *Becoming Abigail* by Chris Abani, and *Sozaboy* by Ken Saro-Wiwa (he was hanged by the Nigerian government for being an environmentalist) have all been influential in my novel. I love everything by John Berger, Cormac McCarthy, and Michael Ondaatje. *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels was life changing for me. And Faulkner. I better stop now. I'll just say that I tend toward the lyrical. I like writing that sings to me.

*When did you first visit Rwanda?*

I visited Rwanda twice—2002 and 2004, both times for about one month. I have never lived there.

*It's hard to believe that you didn't live in Rwanda—your stories are so detailed and believable.*

Setting is really key for me. Perhaps I got some of the details wrong, perhaps this is more an imagined Rwanda, but I try to pay attention to where I am—both in life and in my writing. I traveled around the countryside on back roads with a Rwandese friend to do research. Talked to people, made lots of friends, went to genocide sights, which was such an intensely moving experience. Standing in the schools and churches where the massacres took place imbued me with a sense of reverence, awe, and horror that I have been trying very hard to convey in my writing. The country is very intense. I spent two days gorilla trekking in the Virunga mountains. Mountain gorillas are only found in Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. (Because of the political situation in the DRC, tourists don't go there. The gorillas there are being decimated by poachers and charcoal gatherers.) I also went hiking in Nyungwe forest for a couple of days, went to a beautiful tea plantation, and spent quite a bit of time at Rosamand Carr's Imababazi Orphanage in Gisenyi (I sponsor a child there). The country is very intense.

*Most of the Rwandan stories are set during the time of President Habyarimana's assassination. How do the events of your stories contrast with what is happening in Rwanda now?*

Rwanda is moving forward. I can only say what I saw and what my Rwandese friends tell me. There is a long way to go. There is still the issue of human rights violations—on both sides, to be fair. But, it is mostly, by my understanding, the Tutsi survivors who are being murdered for testifying in the Gacaca—their version of Truth and Reconciliation. Truce is a thin layer of ice over turbulent waters. Hatreds run deep, and I don't think it would take that much to ignite them. The Tutsi have been in

# AN INTERVIEW WITH NAOMI BENARON

power since liberating the country in July of 1994. The West has been reluctant to give Rwanda aid, so I think Paul Kagame, their president, deserves a lot of credit for pulling the country up by its boot straps. I think healing from the horror will take many, many years.

*The Holocaust is a prominent theme in several of your book's stories. What is your relationship to the Holocaust?*

My mother lost much of her family in the Holocaust. I was born in 1951, and the Holocaust was a very fresh wound to both my parents. I spent my childhood bumping into its ghosts. My grandfather was a Yiddish writer [Aaron Osovsky—ed.]. I never met him, and have only read his stories in translation. They were awful. But the myth of my *zeyde* [grandfather] inspired me. From a very young age I knew that writing was in my blood. I have his book on my shelf, and it always makes me proud to see it. I hope that it was a good book in Yiddish.

*How did the fact that both your parents were psychiatrists influence your writing stories about mental illness?*

My parents were a great influence on me, both in terms of my writing and my personal life. Maybe I shouldn't say this, but my parents used to discuss their patients at the dinner table, so I grew up constantly exposed to the field of psychiatry and to seeing human beings in terms of what is going on with them internally. As a consequence I have always found it fascinating. It is second nature to me to analyze people and think about both their psychic motivations and their quirkiness. Fiction is, in the end, about what drives us, so what better background could there be?

Since I was small it was assumed (particularly by my mother) that I would be a doctor. I adored my mother and wanted to be just like her. The situation became complex when she had a psychotic break and became bipolar. What better fiction than this—a psychiatrist who spends 12 years in and out of mental hospitals. As soon as lithium was “discovered” as a treatment for bipolar disease, she became well again. In “The Chemical Nature of Things,” truth and lies are all mixed up, but the thread of my childhood is strong. My mother was never an alcoholic—she was, in fact, allergic to alcohol.

*At the end of the title story, “Love Letters from a Fat Man,” Otto says, “The possibilities of life, I learn, are found in the most surprising places.” What a profound statement. Is it a coda for the book?*

Yes! I always wonder about what gives people the courage and the drive to survive in the face of extreme trauma. I think, in the end, it must be about those surprising little places that we hang onto in our minds. I am driven to read and write stories of witness. But, I am also driven to find within those stories a

message of hope; like parents who sacrifice themselves to save their children, or strangers who step out of their ruts to be of service to others. Or, perhaps a person who sees a hopeless task that still needs to be accomplished, like Ingabire in “A Thousand Dances.”

*There is truth in your stories, and I have trouble believing that your book is wholly fiction.*

I am a fiction writer, which means I am a liar. But, it also means I am a grazer. Real events serve as seeds for me, and I steal them from wherever I can, then I mix them up with my compulsive lies and put the product on the page. I am always on the lookout, always writing things down. I have some specific pastures that have been particularly green, but they shall remain secret.

*Your background in science shows in many places in your stories, such as “The Chemical Nature of Things” and “Vibrations of a Desert Rose.” How do you view the interrelation between science and art?*

Ah! Science and art are inexorably intertwined. So many great artists have been scientists, great scientists have been artists. What could be more artistic than the secret workings of the universe exposed on the page, or in a piece of music, or on a canvas? Like the rock cycle interwoven with the carbon cycle interwoven with the biosphere interwoven with the hydrosphere interwoven with the atmosphere? I love the romance of all the cycles that work together to make the globe work. The idea of Pangea absolutely fascinates me for its metaphor of peace: all the continents united.

*You have been a seaman and a geophysicist. You live an interesting and varied life; is this a blessing or a curse for a fiction writer?*

An absolute blessing. On a personal level, it often makes me feel as though I have dabbled with many things and been successful at none, but, it has given me endless inspiration for writing. It has made me curious and passionate. It has given me strength and weakness. I think exposure is always a positive force for a writer. I can't imagine running out of subjects to write about.

*I can't imagine that you are going to settle down and do nothing but research and write because you don't just observe life—you go out and experience it. What is your next adventure?*

Hopefully, back to Rwanda!

