



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Beverley Naidoo

Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?

Memories of reading at school are frankly negative, including everyone having to read out loud around the class as well as our convent school library being locked up. But I have always loved stories. So did my parents. My father was a composer who wrote musicals for children and adults (professionally but not for a living) and my mother worked quite a bit in radio. Together they wrote stories with music and lyrics about animal characters. I recall favourite books at home like the Andrew Laing books of fairy stories and others about South African animals and folktales. But the first book that told me books could be about real life, and which made a life-lasting impression, was *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Even though I was completely ignorant and unaware politically, I loved her young person's voice and sense of justice. I can still hear that voice and what I imagine would be her horror at so much that is happening today.

Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?

Apart from loving stories that expanded my world, it was probably anger. I grew up in a deeply racialised colonial society. When I was five, the majority white electorate voted for an apartheid government that tightened down racism into every law of the land. It was only years later that I was fortunately challenged to recognise how blinkered I had been. How was it that I had cried over Anne Frank but not seen the reality around me? I knew that if I did nothing and sat on the fence, I would continue to be part of the problem. So I began a process of freeing my mind and books were part of that. The decisions I made while still at university led to detention without trial under the '90 days law'. The following year, when my brother and some fellow activists were sent to prison, I left South Africa and what became exile in England. Some years later, as a teacher with children growing up in England (my husband was another exile), I became aware of the false picture presented in most children's non-fiction books on South Africa. Their misrepresentation of apartheid and implicit acceptance of racism, conscious or unconscious, were shockingly reminiscent of the bubble in which I had grown up. Our local anti-apartheid group began to investigate and ran a campaign for teachers and librarians. I thought our findings needed to be published so

wrote a book [*Censoring Reality*](#) (which you can download from my website). But there were also no fiction books for young people, including my own children, that could take them on a journey into imagining life under apartheid. Having always loved stories, there was a story I needed to tell... and that was the beginning of *Journey to Jo'burg*.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?

It speaks to the reader's heart and mind... and lingers there.

Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books / plan your illustrations?

I have written books for young children, older children, young adults and adults. Each requires its own journey. I remain my first reader, writing the kind of books that I'd like to read and, when writing young fiction, to have read when I was a child.

Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

When a book has carried me into another world, do I want that world to disappear on a click, leaving a mere shadow of itself on a screen? No! Certainly e-books have their uses but tactile, physical books are irreplaceable. A library that has nothing but tables and screens is a nightmare.

Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?

Almost every room in our house has shelves overflowing with books. Does that make me a book collector? Many of these books carry special meanings, having expanded my universe. I don't know in advance whether this will happen but I have just read Ibtisam Barakat's *Balcony on the Moon: Coming of Age in Palestine* and know that it's very special. Isn't it amazing when a book speaks to you across time, place, culture...? I only hope that our society will continue to value libraries as places for readers searching for new journeys through books.