

When Zimbabwe's **NoViolet Bulawayo** won the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing, for her short story entitled *Hitting Budapest*, unanimous consensus was that a new literary star was born. She has now released her debut novel *We Need New Names* a poignant and thought-provoking narrative about her homeland, which she intricately tells through her lead character Darling and her peers Bastard, Godknows, Sbho, Stina and Chipso. *NewAfricanWoman's* **Belinda Otas** caught up with the rising star to find out how she cleverly weaved a story that will tug at you emotionally and make you laugh at the same time. A recommended NAW reading.

NoViolet

BULAWAYO



New African Woman: The themes that jump at you include “Parental neglect, political instability, lost childhood, the burden of shame”... how did each one come to you and contributed to your ability to dig deep and bring these different issues to the fore and explore them like you have as it relates to Zimbabwe?

NoViolet: These themes came to me because they are urgent, in one way or the other, and I'm speaking here as an empathetic human being concerned about the state of my country, my world and the universe. Zimbabwe is emerging from a rough decade where things fell apart in ways that made these issues prominent, and naturally provide a soundtrack to Zim life, so in a way I didn't have to hunt for them, they were just there in your face. They haunt most Zim writing that came out of the time, not just mine alone by the way. I'll own I happen to believe in art that is socially engaged, is against wrongs, and promotes dialogue, and changes attitudes, and this is part of how I arrive at my themes. At the same time it's worth remembering that you look around in any society you will find these things, they are not necessarily my story or a Zimbabwean story or issue, they are simply real issues affecting real people across borders today and now.

Did writing the book make you revise any impressions you had of your own childhood or see events in a different way?

The book is not autobiographical. The events are created. But I suppose I did look back to my childhood, which was full of laughter and beauty and awesome friendships to get the energy that would fuel my child characters.

The names: Darling, Bastard, GodKnows, Mother of Bones - are they symbolic of anything and how in the world did you come up with such humorous names, given the serious nature of the story that is unravelling in their lives?

I come from a culture where names speak, are carefully thought out, and mean something, and since I look at *We Need New Names* as a painting of my culture among other things, of

course I had to bring that dynamic though of course it feels natural to me versus a gimmick cause. I have friends with names like Forgiveness, Knowledge, Moreblessing, so what do you expect? With my characters, I look at who they are as people and carefully give illuminating names that serve more than being a label that says something and anything from character to circumstance. I think it's a pretty sensible way of going about life and I suspect it's going to be my trademark.

Did you have a very specific township in mind when you wrote about Paradise, or could it represent any number of similar places across Zimbabwe?

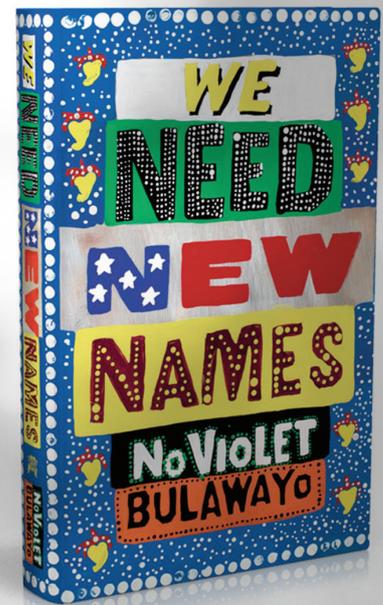
I did not. I was fortunate to grow up not knowing any shanty towns from personal experience so I had to imagine Paradise and create it. But I edited part of the book in South Africa, where of course I saw shanties in Cape Town and Johannesburg, and it gave me something real to hold Paradise against. Still, I think it's important to remember that shanties are, and can be all over the world, including the first world (think tent cities), as long as there are populations under pressure.

Paradise and Budapest and the irony of the two realities - what were you hoping to explore about the 'haves and have-nots' within Zimbabwean society especially during the tough times and the impact it had on people and their views of equality in society which we see across the globe and not just Zimbabwe?

The country, as in any other place, is a land of contradictions, and of course it's absurd that Darling and her friends only have to cross a street to escape the poverty and gloom of their shanty town to find themselves in an affluent neighbourhood. And of course this is played out on a larger scale as the adults are crossing borders to other countries. Again, this is all happening around the world right now, and I suppose I'm interested in the idea of spaces, the psychology of people in different spaces, and how they respond to their circumstances.

You wrote *We Need New Names* while living outside Zimbabwe, in what ways was being far away a bonus to the process of writing about home and being as honest as possible without the tainted interference of being on the ground?

While it's painful being away from home, that distance has given me such clarity of vision in my work. Knowing I have the poverty of distance makes me a better observer, a better listener, a better investigator, a better note-taker because I know I must work extra hard to represent things with truth whereas if I were on the ground I'd take things for granted. I'm not, and every detail, every story, is precious. There's something to be said too about writing from a place of nostalgia and pain - which for me is always my experience. I'm in many things on the page but I'm also a mourner, yearning for what has been lost. I write therefore with urgency, knowing that writing is the only thing that can give me my home, I would never otherwise know this pain without the distance. But of course I'd like to also say that distance should not be overemphasised in 2013-communication is much better than before.



The first half of your book is punctuated by episodes of violence and horror made more bearable by being filtered through the eyes of a 10-year-old. How did you arrive at Darling's voice?

Knowing I was working with a charged book, I had to find a character who could look at horror and still stay intact, still try to go on with the business of life, and that is how Darling was born. The innocence of children and their unacknowledged strength is what allows her to play and be funny and tell us of things falling apart all in one breath.

Did you experience the same kind of alienation in America and yearning for home that Darling voices?

Yes, and it wasn't a pretty experience. What was left out in the narrative of coming to America, and being disconnected from your land, for me, was the cost of it, the sacrifices, you know. Maybe because I was young, I naively assumed I was going to a

golden life and all would be well. What a shock; long, depressing winters, the absence of my friends, speaking in a language (English) I wasn't comfortable with everyday, and having a hard time being understood because of my accent at that time, adapting to a new culture, having to work (as if I was an adult, as if I had a wife!), etc. I think I was slow in adjusting, and I remember I spent my first year in silence, outside the home that is. You couldn't get me to open my mouth in class or at work, and what depressed me was the knowledge that the self that I had become was not even who I was, that in a different place I'd have been totally fine. Still, there is no journey without a price, as anyone who leaves their homeland for another will tell you. It was part of the experience, and a new immigrant is going through it right now.

Later in America, through Darling, you brilliantly and often humorously portray the difficulties of learning

to speak and pronounce an alien language. Is it more liberating or challenging for you to write in English?

It shouldn't be challenging, especially as I speak English everyday but for the strangest reason it is. Maybe it's because I trained myself to arrive at English through my language always, through some interior translation. I think obsessively about every word, every sentence, I can't just drop it on the page, but the reward is that I end up with a language that tries to be textured. I must also say that as roundabout as this process is, it ends up being liberating – the final product is a language that is my own, that is pliable enough to allow me to say what I mean.

What national discourse about this particular era in the history of Zimbabwe, do you hope the story you have told evokes in people at home and in the diaspora and among other people who recognise themselves or the story of their birth country in your characters and the story you have told?

I see names as a portrait of a country during it's trying times and I'm hoping readers, upon seeing themselves and their stories, will be inspired to engage in the kinds of conversations and reflections that critique and make sense of their lived experience, bearing in mind that a conscious mind is also a transformative tool. When you ponder, you recognise problems, you ask questions, you evaluate answers, critique them, and when you come to a point where you reject answers for instance, then you are in a position to decide and define your circumstances. This is what we missed during the period, probably because people were too traumatised by the larger issues. ■

We Need New Names (pgs 229) is published by Chatto & Windus in the UK and Little, Brown in the US. ISBN 978-0-701-18803-0
NoViolet won the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing and was shortlisted for the J.M. Coetzee - judged 2009 SA PEN Studzinski Award.
NoViolet earned her MFA at Cornell University where she was a recipient of the Truman Capote Fellowship, and she is now a lecturer of English and a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. She was born and raised in Zimbabwe.

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