

Carnegie Medal for children's fiction:

# Naidoo's story of two young refugees wins 2001 prize

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*The Other Side of Truth*, ISBN 0-14-130476-6, Puffin Books, 2000, £4.99 (The book is expected to be released in the US Oct/Nov 2001)

This year's prestigious Carnegie Medal for children's fiction, awarded by Britain's Library Association, went to South-African born author Beverley Naidoo, for her book *The Other Side of Truth*. Naidoo used her acceptance speech to attack official political policy towards asylum seekers and to question a world in which "far too frequently, one person's freedom is another's imprisonment".

The book is set in Nigeria during the dictatorship of General Abacha, shortly after the 1996 execution of oppositionist and author Ken Saro-Wiwa. It relates the story of two young children, 12-year-old Sade and her 10-year-old brother Femi. After their mother is assassinated in retaliation for their fathers' outspoken anti-government journalism, the children are forced to flee to England for their safety.

Sade and Femi are smuggled to London and find themselves abandoned and lost in a strange and indifferent land. Their story is a moving reflection on the plight of many young refugees seeking asylum from horrific events. It also serves as a bold indictment of the inhumane asylum regulations that refugees encounter on entry to countries like Britain.

Beverley Naidoo was born in Johannesburg in 1943 and grew up as a white child under apartheid. She was in her last year at school at the time of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, in which 56 anti-government demonstrators, including women and children, were killed by South African police. Later, while at university, she became involved in the growing political resistance against the apartheid regime, and her activism eventually led to her arrest. She spent eight weeks in solitary confinement before being released without charge.

Naidoo came to England in 1965. With the help of a United Nations Bursary she studied English and Education at York University, intending eventually to teach in Nigeria. But after marrying her husband, another South African exile, she remained in the UK, working as a teacher and also beginning her writing career.

In *Censoring Reality* (1985) she analysed non-fiction writing for children about South Africa, showing that most books covering the 20th century history of the country had virtually no mention of

apartheid.

Her first two children's novels were set against the backdrop of apartheid. *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985) won awards in Britain and the USA, and was banned in South Africa until 1991. While researching *Chain of Fire* (1989), she was not allowed to return to South Africa and had to rely on material smuggled out of the country. By the time she was writing her third novel, *No Turning Back* (1995), she was able to return to her homeland to conduct first hand research in the tense lead-up to South Africa's first free elections.

The short stories presented in her most recent work, *Out of Bounds* (2001), are about young people living in a country riven with contradictions. Each story is set in a different decade, covering the period of white minority rule and into the "post-apartheid" era. Throughout her writing career, Naidoo has shown a particular sensitivity to the most vulnerable social layers, especially the young. She said once that she was "especially interested in how adult power and politics touch children's lives and the choices young people make."

At the Carnegie Address given to the Youth Libraries Group Annual Conference at Loughborough University on September 22, Naidoo renamed her speech "One Fragile World," in light of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

She began by recounting a recent visit to a class of 60 teenage Palestinian girls at an elementary school near Jaba Nuzha camp in Amman, Jordan. After reading the opening passages to *The Other Side of Truth*, Naidoo was struck by their questions and comments, which she said revealed a "depth of emotional and intellectual tension beneath the calm exterior of these young students."

She contrasted this thoughtful intelligent approach to the sensationalism of much of the world's press following the terror attacks: "I return to Britain, asking why we do not wish to hear these voices calling for reflection more widely... Throughout the ages, there have been storytellers and writers who wish to 'make some noise' about our common humanity... who believe that the creative enterprise of crossing boundaries imaginatively might help us to understand more about ourselves, each other and our shared world.

"In these perilous times, I believe this enterprise is more important than ever. This is not simply a moral imperative. It is a matter of our survival... Imagination is essential because it opens

the way for hope - and hope for striving. But underlying all of these, we surely must have a commitment to a common humanity. Far too frequently, one person's freedom is another's imprisonment. One person's freedom to acquire vast wealth is premised on another's poverty. One person's freedom to acquire pleasure is the freedom to ignore another's pain... to put up the fence, the wall between us, higher than before."

"In Fortress Europe, politicians and others daily attempt to pull up the drawbridges. I live near a ferry. Recently five people were discovered on a motorway nearby clinging to the underside of a lorry. In passing, the news report mentioned one was 12 and another 14. We must reflect on what desperation makes people hazard their lives to make a journey into an unknown future—and why it is now, more than ever. What has changed?"

"I researched *The Other Side of Truth* on the streets of London and used my imagination before asylum became such an issue... In the West we now desperately need leaders with imagination who will strive to address the fundamental inequality, injustice and disrespect shown for oppressed and poor people's lives in a world that is dangerously unbalanced."

Earlier this summer, Naidoo's acceptance speech at the British Library Conference Centre, had related many of the concerns, ideas and hopes behind *The Other Side of Truth*.

Perhaps the most persistent theme throughout the book is the contrast between the struggle for truth—personified by Sade and Femi's father—and the murky world of the Nigerian government, the people smugglers, the British immigration service and the police. The sudden turn towards deception and lies necessitated by the children's difficult situation weighs especially heavily on the older sibling, Sade. Describing this hostile environment, Naidoo points the finger at those she sees as most responsible: "The world into which the children are thrust overnight is the submerged world of refugees in our midst. Smuggled into London, these young people—brought up with the idea of the importance of 'telling the truth'—are plunged into an underworld of illegality. It is a world that is largely submerged under public indifference and increasingly overt hostility, fuelled by the irresponsibility of politicians and media who are prepared to appeal to the lowest common denominator."

Naidoo decries government attitudes toward the country's youth: "There is a tremendous need in this society for literature that enables young people to cross boundaries... that enables them to explore issues of 'race', class and gender that [ex Conservative Prime Minister] John Major dismissed as a waste of time in education. How could I have begun to understand the experience of my characters without sensitivity to these very issues?"

"David Blunkett [former Labour Education Minister] expresses horror at the racism mouthed by young white people. Yet he does not realise how his own prescriptions have reinforced the sidelining of education for social justice. A few lessons in citizenship will not put this right. This government's functionalist approach to the teaching of literacy is particularly insidious and damaging. It does not, for instance, think it necessary for primary teacher-trainees to engage creatively and critically with children's literature themselves. We have government-backed campaigns to promote reading at the same time that literature is being reduced to

a static comprehension exercise. This is schooling not education."

Naidoo concluded her remarks by drawing a parallel between contemporary Britain and South Africa under apartheid. She spoke of the horror of discovering the humiliating conditions in the government detention centres, such as Campsfield House—"a prison at the end of a leafy lane."

"Images I saw while researching constantly took me back to South Africa. The long queue forced to wait outside the gigantic Immigration and Nationality Department at Croydon brought back childhood memories of the Pass Office in Johannesburg. I had set my previous novels in my birth country in order to explore how we human beings treat each other—our capacity for evil and for good. But after the first democratic elections, I felt it was time to bring some of the issues that concerned me home to England. I say 'home' because, more than 30 years ago, this country offered me, and others close to me, a refuge. The irony was that the apartheid regime also received a good deal of support from the same British government."

The perception evinced in Naidoo's remarks infuses her work. No one should make the mistake of dismissing her books because they are bracketed as children's fiction. In recent years, children's and young adult fiction has shown a degree of innovation and thoughtfulness that compares favourably with the often reactionary and formulaic works that top the best seller lists or even win awards in the world of adult fiction.

A case in point is one of the other books shortlisted for this year's Carnegie awards. *Troy*, by Adèle Geras, is a story about five young people living in the besieged city just before it is sacked by the Greek soldiers hiding in the wooden horse. Recent notable winners of the Carnegie award have included Aidan Chambers' *Postcards From No Man's Land* (1999), a remarkable tale that weaves together two narratives—one in the present day and the other on the battlefields of World War II; David Almond's *Skellig* (1998), a wonderfully uplifting story of how two children befriend what appears to be a down-and-out living in their garden shed; Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials: Book 1, Northern Lights* (1995), the beginning of an ambitious trilogy that explores a 'post-religious' meaning of life and the protagonist's journey to adulthood; and Robert Swindell's *Stone Cold* (1993), the story of life on London's harsh streets told from a young homeless boy's perspective.



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