

CLA BOOK AWARD SPEECH, 2009

Readers tend to ask me two questions. First, where do you get your ideas? And second, how do you get inside the heads of your characters?

In the case of *Chanda's Wars*, the answer to the first question is simple: the idea for the book came from a dream. I'd developed enormous love for Chanda and her family while writing *Chanda's Secrets*. I couldn't stop thinking about them: how would Chanda cope with her responsibilities for Iris and Soly? Would the rift in her family ever be healed? One night I woke out of a horrible nightmare: There was a fire, Iris and Soly had been kidnapped to become child soldiers, and I was in a panic, desperate to get them back. Everything flowed from that.

The second question is trickier: How did you get into Chanda's head? To my mind, the answer to that question goes to heart of the writing process, the reading process -- indeed, to the relationship of literature and life, and the connection of that relationship to our understanding of reality.

I'd like to talk a bit about this relationship because it's the foundation of our lives as readers, as writers, as librarians -- as human beings whose life's work is centred in the world of imagination. What is reality? What is real?

I realized early on that reality is a slippery beast: My mom left my dad when I was a baby. Growing up, I was all too aware that the father I knew was very different from the father my half-brother knew, and even more different than the father my half-sister knew. I realized, too, that my Mom's perception of Dad couldn't have been further from her view of him back in that happy once-upon-a-time world when they were in love and got married.

As a teenager I thought, "If I can't know my dad, how can I know anyone?" The truth is that I can't. None of us can. Not really. Not fully.

But what I came to understand is -- the reality we *can* know, deeply and truly, is the truth of our heart. We've all felt love, hate, jealousy, generosity. We've been better than our best selves and worse than our worst selves. We've lived in grace and in despair.

All of us know these feelings, They're things we share, things that bond us together. that being so, the truth is that we aren't North Americans, South Americans, Africans, Europeans, Asians or Australians -- we're human beings. And no matter what our ethnicities, genders, orientations, ages, or any of the other contexts that nuance our perception of reality -- we share the same human heart.

That's why we can read books and connect to characters written across continents and centuries. The surface details and cultural expression may be different, but what's real, and what really animates literature, is the guts of it, the heart of it.

That's the emotional truth I try to communicate in all my young adult books no matter where they're set. *Chanda's Wars*, for example, is set in a world of child soldiers, but I don't think of it as an issue book. At it's heart, it's about the pain of bereavement, the fear of failure, and the courage to live with truth. Yes, Chanda fights a literal war to recover her young brother and sister who have been kidnapped into the bush. But she also fights a war with her family, with tradition, with a fear of failure, with love and betrayal and hope, as she engages in the universal adolescent war of independence to forge her own identity.

Before writing *Chanda's Wars*, I went to sub-Saharan and spent time with friends in cities, villages and cattle posts. I met with spirit doctors and health professionals, with former child soldiers and their rehabilitators, and travelled into the bush to learn, first-hand, tracking and survival skills. I also created a network of civilian and military readers, expert in sub-Saharan, to vet my text out of respect for the communities in which the novel is set. Their support and encouragement meant, and means, the world to me.

But when it came to the writing of the scenes, I did what I always do -- and what I did when I started my career as an actor playing roles and situations totally different from my own. I imagined myself into the head of each character and asked, as an actor -- "What I do I want? What will I do to get it?" I'd write the word or action, then imagine myself as the character to whom this word or action was addressed. "Okay, X just said or did this to me. How do I feel? What I do?" and so forth. Like a one-person improv.

Working as an actor, before I quite know what's happening, the human heart of the piece begins to beat -- my heart connected to those of my characters: I'm Mrs. Tafa

saying the most outrageous things -- and suddenly I find myself laughing. Or I'm Chanda's Granny, telling the death of my daughter Auntie Lizbet, how she martyred herself to save little Iris's life -- and I find myself in tears. Weeping over the fate of someone who is -- in reality -- abstract formations of ink on paper.

That's what makes writing real to me. When my characters live in my dreams. When they move me to distraction. And that's the kind of reality I try to bring to my YA audience.

Math and science are prized for being knowledge based. The study of literature, by contrast, is often seen as a frill or an entertainment. But literature is, in fact, the most necessary study of all. For it asks us to engage human emotions -- for real. In so doing it develops empathy. Emotional literacy. Literature is a bridge across divides -- a means to see ourselves in the Other and the Other in ourselves.

And Young Adult literature, focused on those years when the stakes are so high and the human beings so vulnerable, cuts even closer to our core. Whether as writers, librarians or publishers, all of us in this room have devoted ourselves to a field as real as it gets.