

FOLLETT INTERVIEW, 2010

You already had a very successful career as an award-winning playwright before you started writing novels. Why did you make the change, and why did you decide to write for young adults?

Ha! If you'd asked me twelve years ago if I'd ever be writing novels or fiction for young adults, I'd have laughed and said you were crazy. As in other areas of my life, however, I've found that life progresses less by conscious design than by a willingness to respond to new opportunities.

In the case of my career shift, I'd written a six-character, one-set play called *The Phoenix Lottery*. But the story kept growing in my mind until it involved a cast of hundreds and swept across North America, Italy, Cuba and the Arctic over a span of eighty years. Since no theater on earth could afford the actors and sets, I became a novelist.

The book was for adults, but it featured extracts from the teen diary of one of its protagonists. Rick Wilks at Annick Press was launching a line of YA novels and wanted playwrights as his authors, given our sensitivity to voice. He knew my theater work and was excited by the teen voice in the diary. So he approached me, the result was the ALA Best Book *Leslie's Journal*. One thing led to another, and here we are.

While your plays have frequently been comedies, your novels for teens are serious, with edgy, contemporary subjects, such as sexually abusive relationships in *Leslie's Journal*, the AIDS epidemic in Africa in the Printz Honor book *Chanda's Secrets* and its sequel, *Chanda's Wars*, and now terrorism and profiling in your latest book, *Borderline*. Have your books generated much controversy? How do you feel when the phrase "ripped from the headlines" is used to describe one of your books.

My novels are written in first-person, a voice that draws us into characters, bonding us to people we might otherwise ignore or reject. As a result, I think people read my books with their hearts rather than from one side or another of an 'issue'. In life, I've always found that human stories are the best way to get people to drop their barriers.

There are, of course, some who insist on censoring and restricting what teens and children read. I say if teens and children are old enough to live an experience, other teens and children are old enough to read it.

You asked about the phrase “ripped from the headlines”: I think it’s the marketing department’s way of saying that *Borderline* speaks to the zeitgeist, connecting readers to major forces at work in our society. The universals of identity, family and parent/child relationships that characterize my work are present here as well, of course. But every work of art is connected to its time. Right now we’re living in a period of fear, suspicion, and secrecy. The headlines that reflect these themes are as timeless as they are current.

***Borderline* combines a fast-paced adventure with an inside look at the family life of a Muslim American teen. How did you research all the different aspects of the book? Have you ever experienced any trepidation in writing about a culture or ethnicity that is different from your own?**

I always take care to have my work vetted by people in communities other than my own. In the case of *Borderline*, I attended mosque with my friends Faisal, Laila and Azeem, and met with Muslim academics and imams, as well as law enforcement, border, and security experts.

That said, while the details of our lives may differ, under the skin we’ve all felt love, hate, joy and despair. That’s why we’re able to communicate across divides of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, orientation, age, class and etcetera. And why we’re able to connect to people in stories from other continents and centuries.

So, when I write, I imagine myself into their shoes. This comes from my theater background. (No living actor, for instance, has ever been a medieval Danish prince, yet many convince us they are Hamlet.) For each character, in each scene, I ask what I’d ask as an actor: What do I want, and what will I say and do to get it?

That’s why I believe that reading and writing develop much more than language literacy. By forcing us to think outside our own circumstances, literature creates empathy -- *emotional* literacy.

We are seeing more books about Muslims and Muslim Americans, but many of them feature female characters. Was there something about this story that made you want to tell it from a male perspective?

I think the kind of physical risk-taking that Sami undertakes to discover the truth about his father is more likely with a male protagonist. But, to me, *Borderline* isn’t a novel defined by faith or gender. It’s a coming-of-age

mystery/thriller about parent/child relationships, family secrets, and a teenager struggling with the competing demands of personal identity and the desire to fit in with peers.

Just as I used my relationship with my mother in writing my Chanda novels, so I used my relationship with my father in writing *Borderline*. My mother left my father when I was a baby. Growing up, it was immediately clear to me that the father I knew was very different from the father my half-siblings knew. "Who is Dad?" I wondered. "If I can't know my own father, how can I ever know anyone? How can *anyone* know anyone?"

The fact that Sami's family is Muslim-American raises the stakes around his father's secret and Sami's struggle with identity. But the human battles he wages are common to us all.

What kind of responses to your books have you gotten from teens, parents and librarians? What responses would you *like* your readers to have? What differences do you notice between your YA and adult audiences?

I've been deeply moved by the reactions I've had from teens, parents and librarians. So many have told me that Leslie has been a personal lifeline. And a teacher in Namibia emailed to say that students in her village who were unable to talk about their parents' deaths from AIDS because of the shame and stigma, found solace in talking about Chanda and her mama.

To me, books are conversations between the writer and the reader. I write as openly and honestly as I can, and I hope my readers respond in kind; ideally, to see themselves in others, and others in themselves. On a lighter note, I especially enjoy it when readers share the humor in my novels. However grim their situations, my lead characters are spiky and resilient: Humor is one of their key defenses.

As for my audience, I think it's the same whether adult or teen. Adults are just teenagers with experience: Civilization is one big high school.

What other acts of intolerance would you like to address in future novels?

Intolerance grows out of fear and suspicion, and since human beings are hard-wired for both, I suspect intolerance may find its way into my work again. But I never start with theme -- I let that grow out of the characters and their situations -- and I hope readers recognize the broader human dynamics at work in my characters' specific situations.

For instance, HIV/AIDS is the central secret in *Chanda's Secrets*. But all of us have secrets -- things we're afraid of people finding out for fear of

shame, stigma and the loss of love and respect. Chanda's fears revolve around AIDS; but I hope readers see AIDS as a metaphor for secrets generally, and our need as human beings to live openly and honestly with truth.

Likewise, Sami confronts fear, suspicion, and prejudice because he's Muslim. But as his beloved teacher Mr. Bernstein knows, what Sami faces is mirrored in the lives of other communities, both past and present. I trust readers to draw parallels between Sami's world and their own, and to see the universal in the specific.

Your books have had wide appeal in the United States and many other countries. Has this surprised you?

Writers have enormous egos. We actually think people should spend their time and money reading our stories. So when they do, I think our reaction is less one of surprise than of delighted vindication. Still, with respect to *Chanda's Secrets*, it never occurred to me that there'd be so many readers for a story set in SubSaharan Africa about a young woman whose mother is dying of AIDS. In fact my former agent thought it would only be seen by students in a few Ontario high schools.

I work equally hard on all my plays and novels, no matter their level of public success. As any parent, I want the best for all my children, but when they're out in the world, their fate is beyond my control. So I hope for the best and tell myself 'what will be will be.' In the end, I write books I'd like to read, trusting that there'll be others who share my taste. Finding those readers is like discovering new friends.

The filming of *Chanda's Secrets* has begun, and, from the details on your blog, seems to be going well. Are you pleased with the amount of involvement you have with the project?

I'm absolutely delighted with the way the film is going, and with my level of participation. It's a German/South African co-production being shot on location in Elandsdoorn, a two-hour drive north of Johannesburg.

I met the producer, Oliver Stoltz, in 2005, when he was promoting his Emmy-nominated documentary **Lost Children** about child soldiers. I

wanted research leads for *Chanda's Wars*, and Oliver had filmed in Uganda's Gulu and Pader provinces, barely escaping attacks from the Lord's Resistance Army. I gave him a copy of *Chanda's Secrets*, and when I was in Germany doing a reading tour for my German publisher, we met in Berlin. He said he wanted to film it. On my next reading tour, I met the director Oliver Schmitz, an expatriate South African whose work has shown at Cannes and been well-received throughout Europe and Africa. (He was part of the directing collective with the Coen Brothers on *Paris je t'aime*.)

The commitment of both Olivers to my work, and their personal familiarity with the world and life of the novel, gave me utter confidence. They took my suggestion of screenwriter -- the wonderful Dennis Foon -- and listened carefully to my notes on his adaptation.

I was thrilled to be on set for several weeks in December. The scenes I saw brought to life -- the revelation of Mrs. Tafa's secret, the passing of Mama -- had me in tears. The South African cast and crew are passionate about the book; their film is a deeply moving and authentic portrait of the pandemic and its effect on a young woman and her family. For anyone interested, my journal of my time on set -- with photos -- can be found in the December 09 entries of my blog, either through my website, www.allanstratton.com, or at my blogsite, <http://allanstratton.blogspot.com>.

Has your busy schedule of writing and visiting Africa left you any time to enjoy your other interests, such as traveling to new countries, spending time with your two adorable "editors" and sampling new Ben & Jerry's flavors?

You've visited my website, I see. The answer to the first two questions is an enthusiastic yes. This past fall, my partner and I spent the better part of a month in Argentina; Buenos Aires was okay, but our favorite part of the trip was at Iguazu Falls and in the mountains of the north-western province of Salta. In January, we went on a personal snorkeling and writing retreat to Cayo Largo; in March we'll be spending two weeks in Vietnam and Cambodia; and in May, it's Italy and Venice for research on a new novel.

My "editors," of course, are our one-and-a-half-year-old cats Soly and Misha who step all over my keyboard trying to catch the cursor. It's wonderful having such editors: A little pet and I'm god, plus they never

write editorial letters. Despite this age of cutbacks, Soly and Misha have recently acquired a pair of ten-week-old editorial assistants: an orange tabby, P2; and a grey tabby, Penster. They're very good at groveling at my feet; now, if only they could fetch coffee.

As for Ben and Jerry's, we're deprived up here in Canada. We get only eight or nine flavors, although I must say they include Cherries Garcia and New York Super Fudge Chunk. When I lived in Manhattan I centered my day around a tub of Coffee Heath Bar Crunch.

Are there any other types of projects you'd like to try besides writing?

No. I'm too boring. My partner would like us to build a cottage, but I hate bugs. I'm also supposed to clean out the basement of boxes of old drafts and childhood toys, but I'm too sentimental. Or lazy. I'm really quite content writing, biking, snorkeling, traveling, seeing shows, and having fun with family and friends, both human and furry. ***

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*** Update for anyone interested: My early drafts and other papers are now at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library within the John Roberts Library, University of Toronto... And we have a cottage. ☺