

INTERVIEW WITH PETINA GAPPAH

Faith Mkwesha

Department of Gender Studies
Abo Akademi University, Finland
faithmk20@gmail.com

This interview was conducted on 16 May 2009 at Le Quartier Francais in Franschoek, Cape Town, South Africa. Petina Gappah is the third generation of Zimbabwean writers writing from the diaspora. She was born in 1971, in Zambia, and grew up in Zimbabwe during the transitional moment from colonial Rhodesia to independence. She has law degrees from the University of Zimbabwe, the University of Cambridge and the University of Graz. She writes in English and also draws on Shona, her first language. She has published a short story collection, *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009), first novel, *The Book of Memory* (2015), and another collection of short stories, *Rotten Row* (2016). Gappah's collection of short stories, *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009), was awarded The Guardian First Book Award in 2009 and was shortlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, the richest prize for the short story form. Gappah was working on her novel, *The Book of Memory*, at the time of this interview.

FM: You are a lawyer by profession. What kind of intersections, if any, do you find between law and fiction writing?

PG: Well, there aren't any [laughs]. The short answer is, there aren't any. But, I believe in the simple answer, because I think there can be an intersection between anything that you really think about. The kind of writing that I do is writing that came to me in part because of the kind of lawyer that I am. I had tried to write before, from the time I was a fairly young girl, I had tried to write novels and that just didn't seem right; I had tried to write plays, poems and that didn't seem right. I just didn't understand why the things I was writing just weren't working. And then, when I finished my PhD, I finished my PhD at 27 (I did my Master's and PhD one after the other), and my first job was with the World Trade Organisation in a sort of tribunal where I helped to draft rulings of the judgement and I learnt the first rule of writing, which is to write cleanly, crisply, to convey complex meaning, use the most simple

language, and that's what I try to do in my own writing, I write very simply. And then the other thing, the more important thing, is that there is no such thing as a perfect draft. I used to give up at the first attempt and I learned that you always have to revise and revise and revise. So we spent a lot of time working on the first draft and polishing, polishing and polishing it, and I remember there was this one judgement that took us 37 drafts to get right, and that's how I write my stories. I'm not satisfied with the third or fifth draft. I revise, revise and revise until it's as close to perfect as I can get it and, even then, I sometimes think, when looking at the story, "Hmm, I'd like to revise that". So, to the extent that my process of working as a lawyer has assisted my process as a writer, I do see an intersection between the two.

FM: What was the genesis of your collection of short stories? What drives your creativity?

PG: Yes, I think this collection – I always say it's the most fortuitous accident that can happen, because I started to write these stories in May 2006, the first story I wrote was something based in London, and I posted it online to an online writing community and we book-critique each other and I took on board some of the criticisms and revised it again and the fourth person who read it said: "I run a literary journal online, can I publish your story?" So that was my first publication. And then, my third and fourth stories I entered for the SA Pen competition and the one that came second was "At the Sound of the Last Post", the story about the widow and the acre, judged by JM Coetzee. He had some nice things to say about that story and that just encouraged me to write more and more. I ended up writing about 22 short stories in about one and a half years. I never at any time thought of them as a collective, they were just stories that I would write and place it in different journals, eight different countries and eight different journals. And then only in August last year, when I was discussing my novel with my agent, she said to me: "Look we're still sitting on the manuscript. Why don't you put together the stories that you think best fit together and we'll send them out, together with your novel?" Two days after we sent them out, Faber called and said, "This is how much we want to offer you, take it or leave it, by five o' clock we want an answer." So it was just the happiest of accidents; it wasn't a plan to write a collection.

FM: What are you writing for and for what purpose?

PG: Hmm. I'm writing because there are some things I want to say about a situation in a country that I – that is closest to my heart at the moment. I wrote because – a lot of the stories that didn't make it in this collection are driven by anger, and I have a lot of stories about the death of justice and all that kind of thing, that were just too polemic, too didactic and not really subtle enough, so I left those out. And I also wrote because I kept getting angry at all the headlines that suggested that Zimbabweans were just these people sitting there feeling sorry for themselves and moaning about inflation and how they were victims of Robert Mugabe, when I know that life goes

on in Zimbabwe, people still get married, people fall in love, people divorce, people have babies, people go to parties. People still do everything that they do in other situations except that it's a little more difficult in Zimbabwe than it is in other places like Switzerland, for instance. I really wanted to portray that life still continues. And then I was extremely upset by the fact that Alexandra Fuller and Peter Godwin were considered to be the voice of Zimbabwe and experts on the Zimbabwe crisis and that the Zimbabwe crisis only had one face and that was the white face, and this idea that whites were the first victims of Mugabe and the only victims of Mugabe upset me a little bit. So I also wanted to show that there is another way of looking at this crisis. I wanted to put this crisis in its context, that Mugabe didn't just wake up after 2000 and become a dictator. This has been long in the evolution.

FM: That's interesting, why have you chosen to write in English, as a Shona speaker, and what challenges and opportunities does the language present you with as a writer?

PG: I think the only time I thought about not writing in English was when I read Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonizing the Mind* and that set me back by about two years, because I didn't feel I could write in English, because I just felt that, as an African writer, I just felt I had to write in Shona. But I really wish I hadn't held myself back in that way, because English is my language, for better or worse. It's like my computer or the technology I use, they come from another country, but they're mine because I've chosen them as my tools and English is, for me, the most natural language in which to write. I will write in Shona, but I'm not very good at narrative. I'm very good at dialogue. Because I think I've developed a good ear for how people speak. Whenever I go home people are shocked because I like to, I use ETs [emergency taxis] all the time. And I think a lot of people don't understand that I'm just really keen to get the outlook on how people speak. I'm very focused on slang and how language develops on the street. And ever since the billion dollar note came out I wanted to know what the slang term was and, of course, it was "biza". So I will write in Shona one day, but it will probably be a screen play, because screen plays are dialogue driven, or a play of some kind, or maybe a TV serial. But, I don't think I would ever write a novel in Shona; that is simply not my medium.

FM: How do you see your role as a Zimbabwean African woman writer? Do you consciously write as a Zimbabwean woman?

PG: It's hard not to write as a Zimbabwean woman, because it is what I am. So obviously my whole view is influenced by the fact that I see injustice around me everywhere I go to in Zimbabwe. I used to be a very radical student when I was at the University of Zimbabwe. I don't know if you recall that famous mini-skirt demonstration in 1993, when a student from Germany, a black girl, who was studying in Germany, came in a nice little short skirt and some boys ripped it off, because they thought she was underdressed and I organised a march – me and my best friend, Jessie

Fungai Majome, who is now Deputy Minister of Justice for the MDC. We organised a march around the campus. Welshmen Ncube joined us and some professors, and a lot of other girls. Some of us wore short skirts and some of us wore trousers, but the point was, we wanted to show that women have a right to wear what they want without being disrespected. So, I've always ... I considered myself at university as a radical Marxist, Leninist, feminist, and I was very much into the process of using law to achieve social change in Zimbabwe – the legal age of majority, which I thought was a seminal piece of legislation, all the laws of succession, all the laws on the guardianship of minors. So, I've always felt very strongly about social injustice in Zimbabwe. I was a rabid, rabid, rabid opponent of *lobola* and I used to have massive arguments with my father, which was quite ridiculous, because I was like 18, and there was no way that I was going to get married, but I still argued so fiercely about it [laughs]. So yes, I mean, being a Zimbabwean woman has really informed my worldview, especially since, at one point in my life, I was really a radical feminist. Um, but I am also not blind to the faults of women; I sometimes think that we are our own worst enemies, the small-house phenomenon, for instance.

FM: I am glad you articulated it, because I wanted to bring it up, but could not find writers who openly talk about it. Yet, it has become a common phenomenon.

PG: I wanted to. I wrote a story about a woman who is afraid that her husband has been cheating on her and, at the same time, she is married to someone who was, you know, she was this person's third wife. So, she had also had another woman who was there before her. So, inasmuch as we fear the hurt that other women cause us, we also cause each other a lot of pain and there's a lot of judgement. You know, you go to a party in Zimbabwe and it's like, "What is she wearing?" That kind of thing. And it's this tedious thing that people, "Oh *Nhingi*", and then, "What is she wearing?" You know, it's just such a petty environment and, um, so I present a lot about what is done to women and also what women do to each other, and what women do to children, especially stepchildren. That's something that really I feel very strongly about. One of my next novels is going to look at this whole stepfamily notion.

FM: How does your current locational distance from Zimbabwe impact on all your writing?

PG: Now that's an excellent question and it's one I've been asked quite a few times during the course of this literary festival and I think its two things. First of all, if you talk to Zimbabwean writers in Zimbabwe, you would know how much of a struggle daily life is, that you really have to hustle your way into daily existence, so sometimes the writing takes a back seat. So, because I'm in a relative position of privilege and comfort and security, I'm able to, you know, focus more on the writing. So I don't need to worry about earning money and all the rest of it. Also, because I'm not actually in Zimbabwe, I can afford to take a more satirical look at the politics, because I'm safer. I don't really think for a moment that all people here

read fiction, but if they did, then the distance makes me a little safer, I think. But, more importantly, I think, it affords me an objective view of Zimbabwe. It's like looking at myself from outside, it's like having an outer body experience. When you are anywhere in any situation you don't really look at yourself, but once you take yourself out of your situation you go, "Hmm. Is this how I really do things? Is this how I really think?" And then you compare yourself with other people that you might meet, because I live in a very global city, where I have friends from God knows how many cities. And it's so interesting to see the departures and the connections, especially since people make so many assumptions about "being African", but God, we're different, we're very different. There are many, many commonalities that we have, but we are also very, very different. So, for me, it's also been very instructive to live in a situation where I can compare Zimbabweans with other people.

FM: So, do you think your book might ever be taught in Zimbabwean schools and universities? How important is the local readership to you?

PG: Oh, it might be. Because there's no issue more important than education. Let me address the teaching first. I invited David Coltart to my launch; he's now the arts and education minister, and he was very positive. He's very kind, said some very nice things, but he couldn't make it, because he had another commitment. And then he asked for a meeting with me, because there's a lot I want to do to promote literacy in Zimbabwe. I wanted to help to establish more lending libraries – I can get all sorts of free books from where I live, going into Zimbabwe, going into the rural areas. I wanted to meet with him to talk about that, which brings me to the question of readership. I've just been on a panel; I don't know if you were there, we were talking about the importance of reading and developing a reading culture. We used to have it in Zimbabwe, but because of poverty, because people can't afford to buy books, we are losing that and so we are not passing it on to our children. So, for me it is absolutely essential that even though my book is published in the United Kingdom, it be made available in Zimbabwe. I have ordered, at my own cost, 250 copies, 50 of them will be going to libraries and some schools; about another 20 will go to journalists and other reviewers and to people like Rubie Mogosvongwe, from UZ [University of Zimbabwe]. [Musaemura] Zimunya is coming to do the keynote speech and he's going to get a free copy and the entire English Department is going to get a free copy, and some schools that I went to will get free copies, libraries will get free copies. And then I'm going to make about 150 available at the launch, for the marked down price of about 10 dollars – I actually thought it was too expensive, but I thought that is the price for a pizza, so I said just give them the pizza and let them buy the book. But then I talked to my distributor in Harare, and they're going to sell it for 20 dollars and I was like – [makes chocking sound] but she thinks that it will sell. I saw Obama's book going for 40 dollars. It's ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. So for me it's also essential to have a readership in Zimbabwe. I write for the Zimbabwean

market and the reason we have so few right now is because we're waiting for the paperback version, because it's going to be a smaller, cheaper mass-market version coming out in January 2010, and it's going to be even cheaper – we're going to sell it at about 5 dollars a copy, and with that version I'm even willing to have even more free copies and like just jump on an ET and say, "Would you like a book?" [Laughs.]

FM: Have you been influenced by other Zimbabwean women writers and in what ways?

PG: Yes. You know I had a very schizophrenic childhood, because my first, A, E, I, O, U, I learned at Gambiza School in Glen Norah, under Ian Smith in 1978. In 1979, we moved to Guda School, after Ali Mazrui started building new schools. Guda was a new school – now it's not called that anymore – and then, the following year, in 1980, we moved to Alfred Beit School, which was predominantly a white school and I was one of four black kids in a class of white, white children. It was paradise. Every classroom had its own library and the school itself had a library, and just across the road was the Queen Victoria Memorial Library, which was really massive. It was just perfect. That was how I developed a reading culture, because suddenly there were all these books. I always loved to read, but I never really had access. But what that meant was that I had a very white view, a white point of view; the only black people I'd read until I was in Grade 7, were from the mind of HR Haggard – *King Solomon's Mines*. That was the only book I'd read with black people, until my teacher – and this is where the importance of a good teacher comes in – my first black teacher, Mr Makwarima ...

FM: Mr Makwarimba?

PG: Makwarimba, yes. He gave me *Things Fall Apart*. That was the first book by a black person that I'd read and the first book involving Africans, and it was mind-blowing and so I said, "Give me more, give me more!" And, unfortunately, he gave me Richard Wright, *Native Son*, where a man rapes and chops up a white girl and burns her in a furnace. It gave me nightmares – I was 12! It was too advanced for me. But then he started giving me things like *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and those other African writers and it truly opened up my mind. And then, thankfully, my parents took me to a mission school, where I explored my reading even more, because they had massive collections of entirely African writers.

FM: In your story, "Mupandawana Dancing Club", M'dara Vitalis dances himself to death and people are cheering him on. That is something ... What exactly are you trying to communicate here?

PG: That story is based on a true story. You know, when Chiyangwa took over G and D Shoe Company, then it was closed later and the workers got a pair of shoes without any pension. So, I just wrote what I got from the newspaper headline when it happened; it was written, "Man dances self to death".

FM: What is your comment on the current transitional government in Zimbabwe and what role do you think women and men should play in the new Zimbabwe?

PG: It's a pity because MDC has taken the same stance as ZANU PF. Where were you during the liberation struggle? For MDC, it's, "Were you at the Zimbabwe grounds?", "Where are your scars for the fight for democracy?" I do not trust politicians; it's the ordinary people, men and women, who will change things.

FM: Why did you give the collection the title of the second story?

PG: Elegy is about the will of the people to survive – their resilience, sense of humour, determination to survive. There are many things I do not like about Zimbabweans, for example, the treatment of stepchildren and housemaids. [Pause]. It's a pity you didn't ask me about religion. My stories are about Catholics, Mapostori, Buddhists, etcetera. I am interested in religion and the effect it has on individuals, and completely fascinated by Mapostori.

FM: How critical are gender issues to you as a writer? Are you conscious of presenting certain images of Zimbabwean women and Zimbabwean men in your writing?

PG: I am concerned with the situation of women ...

FM: What next? I believe you are working on a novel; can you tell us a bit about it?

PG: I am writing a novel, *The Book of Memory*, with some flashback to the past of the war and the present. It is set in Chikurubi and I explore race through a different perspective, that of *murungu dunhu* – albino, and it's about the dislocation and set in the 1990s.