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In Conversation with Beverly Naidoo: On Crossing Boundaries through Reading and Writing

by Julia Hope

Julia Hope (JH): When I was writing my book *Children's Literature about Refugees: A Catalyst in the Classroom*, I interviewed Beverley as part of my research and thought it would be interesting to turn this into a journal article, with an "in conversation" format, which we presented originally as part of a conference on "Writers and Their Education," hosted at Oriel College, Oxford. We've called it "Crossing Boundaries through Reading and Writing."

Born into a white, middle-class family in Johannesburg, South Africa, Beverley Naidoo grew up under the oppressive apartheid regime until the age of twenty-one. She has written a variety of children's and young adult novels, picturebooks, collections of short stories, plays, and adult nonfiction. Her books have won many awards, including the Carnegie Medal for *The Other Side of Truth*, and she also published her PhD, called *Through Whose Eyes? Exploring Racism, Reader Text and Context*, which investigated the possibilities of challenging racism through reading in a school context. In this conversation, I will ask Beverley to talk about her own education, school themes that arise in her writing, her PhD, and wider perceptions of the educative power of literature.

Beverley, I hope you don't mind my remarking that you were born in 1943 in South Africa, five years prior to the apartheid regime being voted into power by a white electorate.

Where exactly were you born, and can you describe this place briefly?

Beverley Naidoo (BN): I was born in Johannesburg. I grew up mostly in a small two-bedroom flat in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, and while we lived in the block of flats, Black servants lived in single tiny rooms above the garages. They were not allowed to use the indoor lift or any of the indoor stairs, so the people actually working there had to use the outdoor fire escape. An abiding memory, that I think will capture it, is of MmaSebate, who was nanny-cum-cook in our family, and essentially my second mother, walking down four flights of fire-escape stairs, with a huge pail of hot water on her head, because of course there was no hot water down in those servant quarters.

JH: Would you like to give the audience a taste of what your primary and secondary education was like as a middle-class white child growing up in South Africa?

BN: We were certainly middle class, but perhaps not entirely conventional in the sense that my parents—both my parents—were in the arts and actually had no interest in owning property. Their flat was rent-controlled and they were very happy just to pay rent. I started off in a state primary school, but then my parents had a close friend who left a legacy for my brother to go to one of the top boarding schools in South Africa, and I think at *that* point they thought that maybe they should put me into a place that was a little more genteel. They chose the convent around the corner, so that was interesting because—Jewish mum, Church of England dad, and Catholic convent—I don't know if my parents realized this, but actually the library was always locked! It had very opaque glass and looked very, very dusty inside. When I asked the vice principal if she would sign a card so I could join Johannesburg City Library—at that stage I had no idea that I was only being allowed access to it because of my skin color—she said, “And what would you be wanting to read more books for,

Beverley? Have you not got enough with your textbooks already?" And of course, very typical of the 1950s, very narrow, very didactic, and compositions marked out of ten.

JH: And of course all white children and white teachers in your school?

BN: Yes.

JH: So let's move on to university. Which college did you attend, and what was it like? Was there any racial mixing at this point?

BN: Yes, there was. And I should have said that the books I got were really through home—well, my parents had books at home, and they were creative folk. They were making up stories about little animals, amongst other things. My dad was a musician, and in his spare time he was putting on musicals, which went on to the professional stage. So I went into University of Witwatersrand and—

JH: Can you tell us where that is?

BN: Johannesburg. The Witwatersrand is the reef where gold was discovered, and Johannesburg the town that grew up to support that whole gold mining. Look at a map of it and the lines are absolutely straight in the center, done with a ruler. So in 1958, the apartheid government passed a law called the Extension of Universities Act, which actually closed down what were largely white universities to Black students. In 1960, my last year in school, was the massacre at Sharpeville, which was not far away from Jo'burg, though I was totally oblivious to it at that time. I got to university in 1961 and there were still a few Black students, who had applied for special permission to go to "Wits," as we called it, because they couldn't go anywhere else for their particular course.

JH: So it was quite a liberal university?

BN: Out of about three thousand students, there were about a hundred students who were not classified white, and I was eternally grateful to my mum, who believed in not giving a young person too much pocket money: two and six, that was five sixpences a week, enough for a coffee a day. I took sandwiches—not very cool—so I didn’t go into the canteen but looked for an amenable group of people to eat these with, and I found this little group of students, Black and white, outside the library on the lawn, and they had the best conversations. *That* was where I began to be challenged. My brother had already begun to challenge me. He had been off to university a year before me and I’d been “Miss Goody Two-Shoes” at that point. They did it in the best kind of way: “Haven’t you heard? Don’t you know what happened at Sharpeville?” Showing me pictures, etc. And this was an extraordinary group really. One of the people who regularly called by there was Dennis Brutus [who was employed on campus as a “tea-boy”]. He was *already* a considerable poet, but he was handing out copies of poems. I’ve got here—the original copy is at home—
“Patriot Two”:

You may not see the Nazis
in our streets,
Certainly no coal-scuttle helmets
or jack boots;
the swastikas are few and far between
drawn clumsily, mainly by pranksters:
no greasy tarpaulins of flesh-soured smoke
drag lazily across our roofs

(Cleanliness!)

You know Dennis was handing these out! I frankly learned more on that lawn from those conversations and people like Dennis than I actually learned inside the classroom walls. So that was really the beginning of my education.

JH: Okay, how did you come to move to the UK, and how did you continue your education?

BN: Well, in that kind of situation, neutrality is not possible. Once I began to realize what was going on, choices had to be made, and I didn't want to be part of the problem. So the inevitable thing was to get involved and, by this stage, it was underground student activity: leafletting, study groups, that kind of thing. Six months after I left university, in June '64, you had Mandela and Co. being sentenced to life imprisonment, and within about three weeks or so they decided to mop up everybody else in the lower echelons. I was a very little fish but 5 a.m. in the morning was... [makes a knocking sound] and it was the Special Branch at the door. It was a nation-wide mopping-up. I was lucky enough to catch a glimpse of my brother, so I realized it wasn't just me, as he was carted off. Then again, this is my education—Pretoria Central Prison in the white women's section, including the death cell, and there were about eight of us. After a hunger strike—because we said "Charge us or else..."—and after about ten days, they said, "Right, we're dispersing you." This was "ninety days," infinitely renewable—and, by the way, "administrative detention" in this country, how different is that?—because there was no *end* period. We knew this could be indefinitely renewed. They told me, "You're so small, we can just forget you here." I got moved to Krugersdorp Prison and that was indeed solitary confinement, but again a *huge* education for me, seeing what actually went on inside that prison. But one of the women in our Pretoria section continued her hunger strike and I think they feared she was going to

die, so [after eight weeks] they charged about eight people—men and women—and my brother was part of that. It became what was known as the first Bram Fischer trial. Bram Fischer was from a leading Afrikaaner family, studied here in Oxford, a QC—he defended Mandela—but he was also the leader of the South African Communist Party.

JH: So how did you come to move to the UK?

BN: Sir Robert Birley, former headmaster of Eton, had come out to South Africa as Visiting Professor of Education at Wits. Very unusual man who used to go into Soweto and teach. I was introduced to him, asked about my degree, and he said, “Oh, I think I can make a connection or two.” I was given a choice of writing exam papers for an Oxford college, but I chose the new University of York, where the education department was being run by Harry Rée, former SOE with the French Resistance. He’d written *The Essential Grammar School*, then completely changed his view and became a strong proponent of comprehensive education. So that’s where I went.

JH: So you fled South Africa and came to the UK?

BN: Yes, came to the UK. And how did Harry get me into education? He just said, “By the way, have you read Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant Noir* [*Black Child*] and Edward Blishen’s *Roaring Boys*? I’d wanted nothing to do with education—I thought it was like my schooling—and then I suddenly realized—wow! It can be about racism, culture, class, and all these things are interesting, and I was turned on.

JH: And what did you study at York University?

BN: English and Education.

JH: Right, another degree or...?

BN: Yes it was, a BA Honours. They gave me a year off. It was darn hard work [laughs].

JH: I believe you trained to be a teacher? Where was this, and how did you find teaching in the UK?

BN: Well, anything to do with Harry Rée I wouldn't have called training! I came down for two terms at Crown Woods Comprehensive in Eltham, in Michael Marland's English department. The third term was an extended essay—write what you choose. I was intending to go and teach English in Nigeria, so I wrote about teaching English in Nigeria—and passed. Then in the process of trying to save up the money to get to Nigeria, I met my husband and thought “change of plan.” Stayed here and the only place that I could get a job at that stage [the end of August] was in a primary school in Newham. So I started off in Newham with a very racist headteacher who also beat children. When I asked how I should handle a child who was very disturbed, he said, “Send him to me”—and he beat him. When the inspector came and I asked, “How should I deal with this? What should I do?,” he said, “I'm moving you.” I said, “No, I want to stay!” And he said, “No, I'm moving you.”

JH: Not the headteacher, interestingly.

BN: No, he didn't move the headteacher. And he moved me about two miles up the road to another primary school, which was fine. I got my probation from there. I got my first proper job in Brent and was teaching essentially Windrush children. The school was called a “comprehensive,” but actually it was segregated because there were these remedial classes and I was like the remedial class teacher in the segregated section. I want to read you a little bit of an essay that I wrote, just to give you a glimpse of that. It's called “A Personal Essay: Young, Gifted and Black” [in *Free As I Know*]:

[Sings] “*To be young, gifted and black, Oh what a lovely, precious dream...*” This brings me back to the words of the song with which I began this reminiscence. It was while I was finding myself sucked into a system and a role with which I had little sympathy, that I first heard these wonderfully resistant lyrics, sung with a rhythm and delight that seemed to defy those high walls, the wire fence, the pokey, dirty streets and the factory gate at the end of the road. Most of all the lovely voices defied narrow, twisted minds. I hoped the woodwork master was listening. When I went down to the playground, there was a group of four Black girls standing by the bicycle shed, oblivious to stares and comments. Their eyes were shining as they kept up their harmonies.

Their singing, and this particular song, became a regular breaktime event for a while. I can’t remember exactly when it stopped. It was some time after it had reached number five in the charts with Bob and Marcia. Perhaps it was when one of the four was sent away to a school for “maladjusted” children. Somehow I felt she would take the song with her.

Do you know what saved me? I read to those kids. Every day, for the last half hour, I read books that I knew would grip *me*, would grip *them*, and we read. And that saved me because for the last half hour we were *equal*, just as readers with the story.

JH: What motivated you to turn to writing and specifically children’s literature?

BN: Well I was part of an anti-apartheid group—and a librarian friend sent me a book on South Africa, asking “What do you think of this? We’re thinking of buying it into the library.” By this time I was peripatetic, teaching children with severe reading difficulty in nooks and crannies, sometimes under the coats.

JH: What was the book?

BN: *Southern Africa* by Rhoda Blumberg—and I suddenly thought, I’ve never gone to look in the libraries in the schools I was visiting. I started looking and I was horrified, finding the same narrative I had grown up with. There were a number of educators in our anti-apartheid group, and we decided to run a campaign directed towards teachers and librarians. We got loads of books from three different areas, libraries in London, and out of London. It was horrifying really, because this was 1980, 1981, and this was after Sharpeville, and after the massacre of children in 1976.

JH: Soweto.

BN: And they were still basically the same narrative. In the end, after the campaign was over, I wrote a book called *Censoring Reality*, which you can download from my website, looking at nonfiction—so-called nonfiction books—on South Africa. I also took what we’d found, to a new little group that had started up, the Education Committee of the British Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa—*not* military defense but defense of human rights and defense of political prisoners. I passed on our findings to the group and its director, Ethel de Keyser. I don’t know if anyone here ever met her, but my goodness, whoa! Ethel, South African activist! She knew everyone and she knew how to fundraise. Ethel said, “Right, what do we need?” We were a small group and we all said, “We need a work of fiction.” Why? Let’s go to the heart first; let the head follow afterwards. Go to the story first. Ethel then asked, “Anyone here know a children’s writer, preferably famous?” I said, “No, but I’ve got a story to tell.” I told them about the flat in which I grew up and Mma Sebete receiving a telegram one day and collapsing in front of me. I was about eleven, but didn’t understand at all. I mean, I was *sad* for her that she’d collapsed, crying, crying. By telegram she had learned that two of her three daughters had died, the two youngest. It was from

diphtheria, a disease against which I, as a white child, had been inoculated. And basically, this was the idea for *Journey to Jo'burg*. I said to Ethel and this small group, that I want to tell that story and I've begun to imagine an older girl who's going to go with her brother to try and get their mother and, through that journey, they're going to find—and open out—what's been happening.

JH: I think you did. I know Michael Rosen did a beautiful foreword to one of the editions of this book.

BN: It got turned down by so many publishers! If it hadn't been for Ethel, it might never have been published. She found a publisher in the end who took it on. I was being told there was a mismatch— "Write it in a more complicated way"—and I said, "No, I want to write it so it can be as accessible as possible and, whatever age person, they're going to take what they can from it."

JH: And it's become a children's classic, I think we could say. A huge story behind the book as well.

BN: That really got me into writing for young people.

JH: We have to move on, but it's a shame because there's a whole story about *Journey to Jo'burg* being banned in South Africa.

BN: Yes, I knew it would be banned because the British Defence and Aid Fund was banned because they were sending money secretly into the country.

JH: Would you like to reflect on how you represent schools and classrooms in your books? I'm thinking particularly of the short stories "One Day, Lily, One Day" in this collection *Out of Bounds* and "The Playground," set in South Africa, and later *The Other Side of Truth* and

Web of Lies, which depict UK school life. What are the key differences, and why is school an important setting for you?

BN: Each of these stories in *Out of Bounds* is set in a different decade, and what I did was to create different fictional characters at different key points in time in South African history. In “One Day, Lily, One Day,” although Lily is not me, I was going back into *my* school. Lily is the child of political activists and so for *her*... Well, I think there are children in *our* schools today who find it difficult to fit into the orthodoxy within that school... so for Lily there would be parents of other children who would say, “Don’t play with Lily, her parents are Commies,” that kind of thing. So I wanted to explore what the events at Sharpeville would mean for this child. In her school, a rumor goes around and she sees the teachers running, as *I* saw teachers and nuns running for the very first time—it was a school for “young ladies” and you’re not meant to run!—running to shut the gates. Why were they running to shut the gates? They were running to shut the gates because [they believed] Black people were coming to Jo’burg to *attack* us. It was only the year later that I actually learned how what happened was the very reverse of that.

JH: Shot down.

BN: Now Lily has got a mother who has then explained to her some of the reality. I want to read you this little section because so many white children in South Africa—children classified white, I should say—were brought up by women who were classified Black. Lily’s dad had been arrested before, during the treason trial, and so this is a little bit of a flashback:

I didn’t say anything in school about Daddy being in jail. My teacher never said a word either, but I felt she knew. It was like a Big Unspoken. When Janey collected

me after school, I could feel the mothers watching us as we walked down the road.

“Do you think they know my daddy is in jail?” I asked Janey. “They know Lily. People like to talk.”

I wanted to explore, wanted to know, how did this child then cope with this...? Yeah, read the story. The other one is “The Playground,” thirty-five years later, 1995. What *should* have been the most important new law for children, was that no headteacher, from now on, “post-apartheid,” was meant to discriminate, although I’m sorry to say that state schools charge fees... But this story—about the first Black girl going into a previously all-white school—I picked up through a little news item where it was reported there were [white] parents who were *armed* and this [Black] child is going in to the school and the reporter asked her, “So how are you feeling?” She then said the most amazing thing: “They will want me when they know me.” I imagined she had a mother who was very strong, and when this child expressed fear [panicked sound], her mum saying, “They *will* want you when they know you.” Later I adapted the story into a stage play. Nadine Gordimer always said the short story is like an egg, and I had to crack open the egg and discover more about it [laughs]. It came on at Polka Theatre. For that I went into South Africa to do workshops and again later with my director, Olusola Oyeleye. In 2003, I was doing workshops in a rural school with only white children—well, the only children I could see were children who would have been previously classified white. The only Black face was Nelson Mandela on the library wall, in a picture next to a red teddy bear. Then going in to a school on the edge of town, who were the children there? They were all Black children. I was doing workshops around friendship to try and get their sense of what that was like. Referring back to your question about differences in my SA and UK school settings, I think more about connections, not so much differences.

So let's end with a story. So this is from *The Other Side of Truth*, where Sade has come to London with her younger brother. Overnight their lives have been transformed because their father is a brave outspoken journalist in Nigeria at the time of General Sani Abacha. It starts with an assassination attack in which their mother is killed and these children, who have been brought up telling the truth, suddenly find the truth is very dangerous. They're now in London and this is the first day at school for Sade. She has been asked to sit next to a girl called Mariam who comes from Somalia and who is a refugee:

At break, Mariam showed Sade to the girls' cloakroom.

"I wait for you here," she said, pointing to the corridor. Sade pushed open the door, leaving Mariam outside. "Oi, Marcia, look who's here!" Donna and two other girls were by the sink.

"Who?" Marcia's voice came from behind one of the toilet doors. Sade's instinct told her to leave but Donna had already slipped between her and the cloakroom door. She had put something on her eyelashes that made her pupils into little blue pools each surrounded by a circle of black, rather sticky ferns.

"What's your name again?" she demanded cheekily, "Marcia wants to know." Sade pressed her lips together. She was aware of the other two girls closing in on her. A chain flushed and a lock was unbolted.

"Miss Harcourt says your English is excellent!" Marcia mimicked Mr Morris. She leaned against the cloakroom door next to Donna and folded her arms. With her stacked heels she was taller than Sade.

“So you’d better tell us. What—is—your—name?” She bounced the words like she was skimming a sharp stone over water, waiting to see it hit her target. Sade felt trapped.

“Sade... Adewale,” she said slowly, forcing herself to look at Marcia.

Don’t let them see you’re afraid!

“Sha-day-aday what?” Marcia drawled. “What kind of name is that then?”

“Nigerian.” Sade tightened her fist on her rucksack strap.

“How come you speak English then?” Donna asked pertly. Sade knew they weren’t interested. They wanted to play with her until they grew tired.

“We have lots of languages. One of them is English.” She couldn’t stop the edge of curtness in her voice.

JH: Thank you so much for that, Beverley. Now are there any questions from the audience?

Question 1: You mentioned that you did workshops with various schools in South Africa.

What language did you use in those workshops with those children?

BN: In English. Most kids in South Africa are very, very multilingual and I’m afraid I’m *not* multilingual, which makes me extremely cross. I learned Afrikaans as a child because English and Afrikaans were seen as the two major languages out of Europe. When I was a child, I had a child’s facility for learning other languages, and there are at least eleven major languages in South Africa, but that wasn’t an option. So the workshops were in English. Ever since I was able to go back to South Africa after ’91, I’d go and do workshops—e.g. for *No Turning Back*—and usually, I’d work with someone in collaboration and very often that

person has been a great friend, Martha Mokgoko. She is one of the most wonderful educationalists I've met, and she would pick up on subtleties, interpret if necessary. But generally English has been the language. Sorry, yes, that's my limitation.

Question 2: One of the things that struck me about your sketch of your biography at the beginning was that you were oblivious to the horrors of apartheid when you were growing up until you went to university. But I wondered how you try and capture that—how that informs your writing for children. I mean, it came up again when you were doing some readings from your work, and I wondered how you try and capture that not knowing about things that might be going on that are politically difficult and whether it's—

BN: You know, I've never consciously written a "me" character. I don't *think* so, unless I'm Lily's friends—oh dear! By the way, I didn't say that when I was at university, one of the great things was being introduced to books that I'd never come across before, so *Down Second Avenue* by Es'kia Mphahlele, *Tell Freedom* by Peter Abrahams. You know, being invited by a writer into their world! And realizing it's just near here and I don't know it! So I think for me it's always a journey, and that's why I've been doing my workshops, as a way of connecting, observing and watching other people do drama with kids—looking for what's the "unspoken," you know, has been *very* important. I've got a great friend, Olusola Oyeleye, wonderful theater director with whom I've worked on drama/writing workshops and made a couple of visits to South Africa, you know learning, learning, learning all the way.

JH: Can I suggest, in the short story "The Playground," which Beverley talked about, a Black girl going to a white school, the first one going in, she—Rosa, the girl—as a child had played with Hennie...?

BN: Yes, Hennie, you're right.

JH: Who was the son of the Afrikaans family.

BN: He's a white boy and Rosa's mum has been looking after him.

JH: So they play together in that way that children were allowed to in apartheid South Africa.

BN: In a rural area.

JH: Okay, yes, you know about it more than I.

BN: Yes, in a rural area. So a mother like Rosa's mum could take her child into work—if she was allowed—and, one day, Hennie's father comes back in a really foul mood and he has a go at his wife because he sees these children running around, playing with the water, etc., etc.

JH: But that also happens in *Burn My Heart*, which is about the Mau Mau, when the children on both sides play together innocently, and it's only as they get older—

BN: Mugo and Mathew in *Burn My Heart*, set in colonial Kenya. How did I know that setting? Colonial Kenya is also colonial South Africa. And yes, they play, but actually there's a power relationship, you know, because Mathew will grow up to inherit the farm. He's expecting Mugo to look after his horses like his father is doing for his father. So I've been exploring it. I think having room, learning to perhaps step back a little bit. I don't know, you have to judge. I think you have to judge through the work.

Note

This article is based on a presentation given at Oriel College, Oxford, for a conference on “Writers and Their Education,” September 20-21, 2018.

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Beverley Naidoo has written novels, picture books, short stories, two plays (stage and radio), and adult non-fiction. Her new novel *Children of the Stone City* will be published in 2022. Her early works were written in exile in the UK but set in her birth country South Africa, with *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985) banned there until 1991. Her PhD (1992) investigated the potential for challenging racism through reading literature in school. After South Africa's 1994 "transition", Naidoo turned to writing about children from other African countries, as in *The Other Side of Truth* (2000, Carnegie Medal), its sequel *Web of Lies* (2004) and *Burn My Heart* (2007, Children's Africana Honor Book Award).

Julia Hope is Head of the MA in Children's Literature at Goldsmiths College. She often features Beverley Naidoo's work, particularly in her book *Children's Literature about Refugees: A catalyst in the classroom* (2017) as well as in related articles, at conferences and in her teaching. Julia read English Literature as an undergraduate at Sussex University, and studied for her MA and PhD at Goldsmiths, while teaching for 16 years in primary schools in South East London. Every year she invites Beverley Naidoo into a local school where she is a governor, to talk to the children and Goldsmiths' students together.