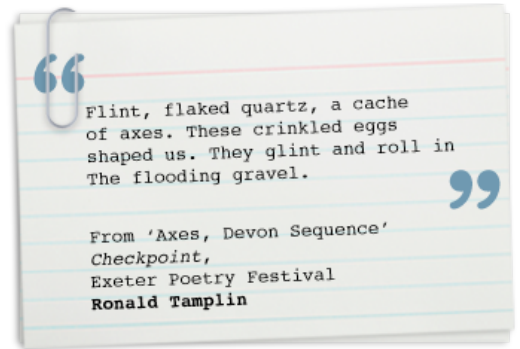




Good Morning! It's Monday on July 04, 2011.

Literature for everyone in the South West

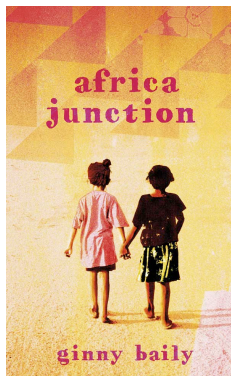


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GINNY BAILY interviewed by Sally Flint



Ginny Baily was born in Halifax, grew up in Wales, then worked in France and Italy before she settled in Exeter. She has a degree in French and Italian and a Masters degree in English. She is political editor for Africa Research and also co-edits the short story Riptide based at the University of Exeter. Her award winning writing has been widely published. Ginny's co-editor at Riptide caught up with Ginny on the publication of her debut novel Africa Junction.

Africa Junction is described as 'a brilliantly constructed first novel following a young woman's quest for redemption set against the kaleidoscopic backdrop of modern Africa.' Could you comment on how the novel developed and how important sense of place was in the narrative - the backdrop of Devon seems equally important.

The novel developed from a single image - a troubled young woman looking in the mirror and seeing there, instead of her own reflection, that of someone else - an African woman. I had that image in my mind for a long time before I started to see how to develop it but it's at the heart of the story because it opens a door between an African world and a British one. In my editorial work I deal with dry academic facts but going to Africa has had a huge impact on me, the smell of it, the colours, the music, the intensity of light and shade.

The mirror image also encapsulates and expresses many of the novel's themes - of how we are all bit players in each other's life stories and of how we rarely see the whole picture for example.

Sense of place is important. I think my memory and imagination function in a very visual



Literature Clips

M.R. Hall The Disappeared



John Haynes and You (courtesy Seren Books)



way and so I have to place my characters in specific locations before they can start to move or speak or interact. In the novel, just as my protagonist Adele's story echoes and is echoed by her African counterpart's story, so the red earth of Devon, the smell of wood-smoke on an autumn day, can evoke memories of the colours and smells of Mali.

Can you tell us about the gestation of the novel? How long did it take to write? Was much research involved?

The novel took about three years from start to finish although the gestation period was much longer and I'd started to explore the mirror image I mentioned before in an earlier short story. The research was twofold - my work on the Africa Research Bulletin provided me with a lot of the background facts and my own experiences travelling in Africa gave me the sensory detail that could bring it to life. The novel synthesises these two aspects of my experience of Africa. It closes the gap between some of the big African stories we know from a distance - of AIDS, war, famine, migration - and the human reality of them.

The process of research was also an ongoing one while I was writing. Amongst other things, I built up a library of photographs of all the places where the action is set and referred to these often so that I could always remind myself of what my characters were seeing and that would spark the scents, sounds and texture.

Claire Morrall states that 'Ginny Baily writes with perception and insight, telling the stories of her many characters with great skill and eventually weaving them together into a satisfying whole.' Could you tell us about character development?

It seems to me that my characters develop in one of two ways - they might start off a bit fuzzy and then slowly emerge as I write - becoming three dimensional through the process of writing them. I know when they've got there when they won't do something that I had planned for them. They seem to have developed their own ideas! Quite often though a character strides into the story fully formed and I think: 'Where did he come from?' Then I go backwards tracing the provenance of this person and uncovering a whole new aspect of the story that has been quietly simmering somewhere in a back room of my consciousness. For example George in my novel appeared like that - purposeful and sure of his place in the world I'd created. Then it was through retracing his steps before that moment that an important strand of the plot developed.

What about plot? What drives this story and why did you as a writer make the decision to structure this novel as a non-linear narrative?

Well, like all of us, my characters are formed by their history, family, relationships, where they come from and so on. And then, being who they are, when something happens - a break-up, a new encounter, the birth of a child, illness, upheaval, war - they respond in a certain way and that sets a whole new array of events in motion. For example, in George's case, major political events and smaller personal tragedies have shaped him and inform his decisions. The effect of the choices he makes ripples through the novel touching lives of people he doesn't even know. So, in that sense, the plot is character driven. I'm very drawn by this notion - of connections made and missed, untrodden paths, knock-on effects and with implying where a story might have gone if a different direction had been chosen. The non-linear narrative reflects this. Chronology is just one way of ordering events - when we piece together something that happened, we may try and impose a chronological order but that's not really how we remember I don't think - events come to the fore or retreat into obscurity based on how important they were or seemed to be. The narrative structure in Africa Junction reflects this. It allows for delays in grasping the significance of an occurrence and gives the reader opportunities to make sense of things that might elude the characters themselves.

The character of Adele is at the centre of the narrative. The other characters are like satellites that spin on their own trajectories around her planet, some closer, some more elliptical. In this way I took the opportunity to explore radically different lives and view points. If another character had been at the centre, there would have been overlap but the story would not have been the same.

What advice would you give to new writers?

My main advice would be: 'Write!'. Put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and get going. I would also say get feedback - show your work to people, go to classes, join a group. Be robust but be willing to listen to people's reaction. Read masses. Notice what other writers have done that you can learn from.

Philip Hensher describes the novel as 'always exactly conceived and precise... it

grips the reader throughout.' You have extensive experience as an editor – has this helped your writing?

Yes, editing has impacted on my writing – it's taught me the value of cutting, shaping, avoiding repetition, being concise. My concern is with finding the words, the right words and in the right order to express exactly my meaning. I'm a wordsmith really. All my work relates to words and language and what excites me is that you can get the same old words, the ones we've been using forever, and arrange them in such a way that the newness and truth of their impact can shock, surprise or delight. I think that's brilliant.

Do you think it is important for writers to be aware of and read the latest publications and prize-winning novels? What are you reading right now?

Reading is important for a writer. Not just the latest publications but all sorts. I'm reading Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* at the moment. It's a wonderful book, full of insights and surprises, concerned with the minutiae but with a huge scope.

One last question – as a writer and as an editor how do you view new developments in publishing. Your novel will no doubt be made widely available on kindle/ipads/ebooks etc.

I don't know what the long term impact of these developments will be. I've observed people who used to sing the praises of books, the irreplaceable feel of the paper and so on going strangely quiet when they get an e-reader for their birthday! I can see the value of them but I'm hoping that there's a place for both hard copy books and the electronic versions; that they can co-exist.

Come to Ginny's Book Launch for *Africa Junction* - [click here for more information](#)

Ginny will also be in the Waterstone's Exeter Roman Gate store for an informal signing on May 21st 12noon-2pm

Sally Flint is a published, award-winning writer of poetry and prose. She teaches creative writing at the University of Exeter and is co-editor of *Riptide* short story journal based in the Department of English. Her ongoing research investigates the creative practice of writing. She is also a board member, facilitator and advisor for 'Stories Connect' - a community based project which aims to help vulnerable people in society 'change their lives through literature'.



Interview Archive

June 2010: Katy Guest

July 2010: Susanna Jones

August 2010: John Haynes

September 2010: Candy Neubert

October/November 2010: M.R. Hall

December 2010 Waterstone's Exeter Roman Gate

January 2011 Dave Bradley Editor in Chief, SFX

February/March 2011 Keith Blount, Scrivener/Literature & Latte

April 2011 Rachael Boast

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