



## ON TRUTH AND BEAUTY AND MAKE BELIEVE

### – some personal reflections

I've always felt that stories hold their own truth, regardless of whether they have fact as their foundation. The creative mind, with its freedom and lightness of being, has traditionally taken flight from the prosaic, bureaucratic demands of the concrete, so called real world. This flight makes our lives richer across all human dimensions, including the emotional, inventive and spiritual worlds we inhabit, which never sit comfortably on the pillars of our trustworthy reality. We have so much to learn from this escape from the real – and the real is forever enriched by the weightless adventures of the imagination, I believe, although not everyone would agree. Plato, for example, famously denied poets a place in his idyllic Republic on the grounds that they were incorrigible liars, but Isabel Allende reflects the sentiment of many writers when she says: “you can tell the deepest truths with the lies of fiction.”

The writers of fiction are often a little worried that people might discover that they're making it up, which of course they are, but sometimes literary invention can raise some looming ethical questions, too. This was the case for me when I wrote my second novel, *There, Where the Pepper Grows* – a novel set during the Nazi occupation of Poland – a story about an unusual family that flee persecution and cross the world to find an unlikely homeland in Calcutta. My biggest concern was this – was it ethical to write a fictional story about a horrific historical truth, and one that was still in living memory? To compound the agonising weight of this question, I read Inga Clendinnen's award-winning book, *Reading the Holocaust*. In her chapter on representation, she posits that art serves to magnify human experience, and in the case of the Holocaust, that experience cannot be magnified any further – the truth looms larger than any representation of it ever can. Her sentiment was that the Holocaust should be left to historians and those whose job it is to gather facts and real histories to represent the suffering that took place.

On hearing my anxiety, my Polish father-in-law, reassured me, saying: “Whatever you can imagine took place during that time in Poland, Bem, probably actually happened.” It was all the encouragement I needed to trust my imagination and find my way towards a human truth in the story I was telling. My first novel, *The Seduction of Silence*, had toyed with magical realism, or what I came to coin as ‘spiritual realism,’ exploiting the beauty of the

half-truth, but I knew that this book would have to feel utterly truthful in order to honour and bear witness to those who still lived with the memories of those times.

I am forever grateful for an Asialink residency and the Prime Minister's Literary Fellowship, which gave me the funds to research my novel and find the facts to support my imagination. This funding allowed me to discover that I had begun telling a tale that had actually happened. My research took me to Nahoum's Bakery in Calcutta's New Market, to meet one of the last remaining members of the once-thriving Jewish community, David Nahoum. When I arrived there, I told David that I was writing a story about a family that arrived in Calcutta from Poland during the war, and I wanted to know how they might have stumbled upon such a far-flung place. (In the Polish idiom I chose for my title, a place where pepper grows is considered wildly remote). The true story he told me set my imagination off on its journey once more. "There was a boat that arrived here in the Bay of Bengal with engine failure on its way from Japan to Palestine during the Second World War," he said. "There were thirty Polish Jewish refugees on board." He gave me books of personal histories to read and I began to live in the minds of those characters – I explored their reactions to the splendor and extravagance and safety of Calcutta – and in their times they must have truly felt like strangers in a strange land. For four years I lived stateless, in the hearts and minds of those refugees.

During this trip I went to Poland and some friends at the Gardzienice Theatre Company near a small town, Piaski, took me to meet the local schoolteacher for my research. This incredible man had galvanised his high school students to pick up guns from dead Nazi soldiers during the war and hide those guns in coffins for the resistance movement. I told him that one of my characters was a doctor and would have come to live in the small town of Piaski during the war. I asked him how this character would have possibly been able to travel from Warsaw to Piaski back then. What he began to tell me, in a broken, breathy voice due to his tracheotomy, still sends shivers down my spine. "There was a doctor who arrived here during the war," he said. "He lived in this very room..."

From then on I have had the sense that we do not find our stories, but our stories find us, and when they do the truth is so forceful you cannot deny its validity. Later, when *There, Where the Pepper Grows* was published, people who had lived in the Jewish community in Calcutta and in Poland during the war told me how many memories it brought back. It was so heartening to hear their responses because this novel had been an exercise in imagination, written from the perspective of an old, Jewish man who had lived through

atrocities. I was neither old, nor Jewish, nor a man. Moreover, I had lived my life in peaceful times, yet the truth shone through, as it does, because it was an emotional, spiritual truth, not simply a factual one. The value of the creative mind in creating such fictions can never be underestimated. The narrator of this novel, Benjamin Rahabi, tells us that he wrote the story because he believes that “stories have the power to save us.” Whether those stories are fact or fiction, we have lived and learned from stories as long as we’ve made records of our progress. We can never underestimate the power of our fictional, creative minds to create our world and a human future that’s truly worth inhabiting.

**- By Bem Le Hunte**

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