

## **Aminatta Forna: 'We don't commit suicide - we kill'**

### **Aminatta Forna's writing is haunted by the spirits of her Sierra Leonean warrior ancestors. Julie Wheelwright meets her**

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Aminatta Forna's study in her elegant south-London home is filled with photographs of her family's village in Sierra Leone. The award-winning author of *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, a memoir about her childhood, is showing me a hand-made gallery of aunts, uncles, cousins and the village school she has helped them build. She runs a hand over the images. "Those are all the Fornas over there," she says, pointing to row upon row of relatives, patiently standing in the glare of an African sun.

Forna's memoir about Sierra Leone was written, she says, "because I wanted to find out who killed my father". Mohamed Sorie Forna was a scholarship boy from a provincial village who trained as a doctor in Scotland and later became a finance minister in Siaka Steven's government. He was taken from their home under armed guard one night in Freetown when Aminatta was aged 10. She never saw him again.

He was charged with treason for setting up an opposition party, and a year later he was hanged. "The memoir was quite a man's book," says Forna. Next week, she publishes her first novel, *Ancestor Stones* (Bloomsbury, £14.99), which features the lives of four village women in Sierra Leone.

The germ of the novel came from a passing reference in her memoir to Beyas, Forna's great-grandmother. At the age of 12, Beyas was taken captive by a warrior when her father's kingdom fell to enemy forces during the Gbanka wars in the late 19th century. Her captor was Pa Morlai, Forna's great-grandfather. "He took her away and then married her at the suggestion of his mother. Years later, Beyas went to the market and recognised her family's design in a seller's basket. She sends a message back to her brother and they come to redeem her."

Forna warms to the telling, spreading her broad hands as her voice settles into the story's rhythm. When Pa Morlai set off across the hills of Sierra Leone with a calabash of gifts to woo back his wife, no longer a slave, she agreed to marry him again. "Then when the celebrations are over, Pa Morlai says now we're going home, and Beyas says no." Forna

slaps a hand on her knee, laughing at the audacity of this former slave who rejected this second form of servitude.

The four women who narrate *Ancestor Stones* are made of equally stern stuff as they endure war, sexual exploitation, male betrayal, poverty and cultural disenfranchisement across a half-century. For a year, Forna left her South London home to immerse herself in the stories of the lives of her relatives in Magburaka, the family village where her grandfather Pa Roke had lived with his 16 wives. "I talked to all of his daughters and collected the stories and details about how people lived," she says. "I was always at heart a novelist and wanted to tell a bigger story, so I wanted to create people who told other kinds of truths than literal truths."

The novel is framed by the experience of Abie, a mixed-raced Londoner who is left a coffee plantation in Sierra Leone. She leaves her husband and two young children to claim the property and there gathers advice, understanding and history from the tales of her aunts, Hawa, Serah, Asana and Mariama Kholifa. Their lives have straddled the ancient systems of tribal law and the havoc of Sierra Leone's civil war in the 1970s to emerge into the new millennium.

A former BBC journalist who has spent years reporting on African stories, Forna admits that she found writing fiction "immensely difficult". Although she wrote the first chapter "about 14 times", once she had set the characters on their path, the journey of their lives became clear. Among the most striking is Serah, whose mother Saffie, the tenth wife, tried to pay back her bridal dowry and win her freedom. Saffie ends up as little more than an indentured servant, but Serah comes to England, marries a treacherous Creole and eventually becomes a successful businesswoman.

West African women, Forna explains, have very dominant personalities. Despite the polygamous households headed by a man, these fragile monarchies are underpinned by the women. "They are running everything below and are the ones who keep men in their place and women in theirs." There may be few serving in government but there are thousands, like her character Serah, who displayed an immense courage. As a returning officer in the 1996 elections in Sierra Leone, she ties herself to the ballot boxes to prevent the army destroying them.

Over the course of writing two books about Sierra Leone, Forna says that her relationship to the country has undergone a seismic shift. "I had a horrible childhood - it was both glorious and awful there - I was only 11 when my father died." By that time, her father was divorced from her Scottish mother, Maureen Campbell White, and had remarried a Sierra Leonian, Yabome Kanu. Forna spent her teenage years travelling between a boarding school in Surrey and her stepmother's home in Freetown.

"My childhood ended in this horrible way," she says. "I lived in a country where I didn't trust anybody. Something awful had happened and no one was talking about it. People would smile and say, 'Your father was a great friend of mine'. He had died as a traitor but people talked about him as a hero." So Forna embarked on her memoir, breaking down

innumerable obstacles to find out who was responsible for Mohamed's death. "My sister had warned me to be careful about what I might find out because it might be worse than I imagined and it was."

Forna discovered that all the witnesses in her father's trial had been bribed to testify against him. "I embarked on *The Devil that Danced on the Water* with my heart in my mouth," she says. "I knew who had done what, who was responsible. I ended the book, feeling absolutely furious." But if Forna was determined to identify her father's killers, her other motive for writing was to clarify her hazy clutch of disconnected memories; seeing snow or tasting Coca-Cola for the first time. "I wrote that memoir because I was completely confused," she says. "No one ever sits you down at age eight and says, 'Aminatta, this is what's happened so far.' You have to work it out for yourself, and by the time you do, it's ancient history to many of the players. We're trying to make sense of the past so we start to excavate our memories."

But if Forna has completed her passage from journalist to non-fiction author (including *Mother of All Myths*, a polemic on modern motherhood) to novelist, she remains determined not to be pigeon-holed as a "mixed-race writer". She is currently working on another novel set in Sierra Leone but narrated by Adrian, a white, male aid worker, an expert in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who comes to Freetown after the civil war and "just doesn't get it".

Adrian appears fleetingly in *Ancestor Stones* as a counsellor to Mariama, a convent girl sent to England and incapacitated by culture shock. As she tells her niece Abie, "I know what it is to look for yourself and see only the stares of strangers. To look for yourself in circles until you are exhausted." Adrian may be genuinely sympathetic but Mariama knows that "he was thanking God, thanking him over and over in all his merciful glory... that he would never be me."

To research this novel Forna gained access to a psychiatric hospital in Freetown, run by the country's only professional psychiatrist, an Italian. "What fascinates me is the question about whether you can diagnose an entire country as suffering from PTSD," she says. "When do we stop pathologising things and start calling it life?" Re-reading the political theorist Frantz Fanon, she wonders whether the colonial experience induces a form of madness.

While Forna was at the hospital, a female patient was having a lacerated wrist bound by an Italian nurse who assumed she was treating a botched suicide attempt. "I asked the doctor if he had ever come across anyone trying to commit suicide. He said no." Forna explains that in Sierra Leone, still a community-base culture, feelings of disappointment, loss and rage are externalised, not internalised. "We don't commit suicide, we kill."

Forna, however, doesn't feel torn between her two countries, quite happily travelling between them several times a year. She pays her taxes and keeps her clothes and wolfhounds in London where she lives with her husband, Simon Wescott. In Sierra Leone, she is replanting her family's coffee plantation and helping with the administration

of the Rogbonko Village School. "There everyone thinks I'm European," she says. "It amazes me that here people can't see the white in me and there, they can't see the black." But in Magburaka, Forna is above all else Po Roke's granddaughter, and the great-granddaughter of a Loki warrior who has gone looking for her inheritance as their storyteller.

### **Biography**

Born in Scotland in 1964 to a Scottish mother and a Sierra Leonean doctor father, Aminatta Forna grew up travelling between the two continents of her parents. Her father was executed for treason under the dictator Siaka Steven's government in Sierra Leone in 1975, and her critically acclaimed memoir *The Devil that Danced on Water* describes her search for his killers. The book was runner-up for the Samuel Johnson Prize in 2003. A broadcast journalist, she is also the author of *Mother of All Myths* (1998). Her first novel, *Ancestor Stones*, is published next week by Bloomsbury. She divides her time between Sierra Leone, where she is restoring the family coffee plantation and supporting a local school, and London, where she lives with her husband Simon Wescott, a furniture designer.