

Writer, journalist, broadcaster, and philanthropist, Aminatta Forna reveals herself to be one of life's natural explorers.

By: Elaine Williams

no stone... unturned!



*A*ncestor Stones is Aminatta Forna's first excursion into the world of fiction writing and has its genesis in the research she embarked on for *The Devil That Danced on the Water* - a factual account of her father's life in Sierra Leone.

"I'd spent a long time in Sierra Leone talking to my family about their past and what it was like to grow up in the villages. I was quite compelled with this amazing world that I had never known anything about, and I wrote a little bit of it in *The Devil That Danced on the Water*. I always knew that I wanted to go back to it, so once that book was published I spent a year going back and forth talking to women and men about their lives from the 1920's to the present day".

Set in an unnamed African county, *Ancestor Stones* introduces two generations of women - the wives and daughters of the head of a polygamous family unit. Spanning a history of pre-European colonialism, colonialism, and civil war, the daughters recount stories that tell how they quietly strived to carve their lives amidst traditions, political upheavals and the unavoidable encroachment of change. Regarding her decision to focus on women Forna says,

"What I was really interested in about their lives was the mirroring of the personal with the political, and I think women's lives do that in a way that men's lives just don't".

One of the themes explored is polygamy. Far from the imaginings of male fantasy, we are presented here with an extremely delicate often fraught system of hierarchies, in which no one seems to fare well,

"Men have always had a nudge, nudge, wink, wink thing about polygamy, and the idea that five wives have got to be better than one, but by the time you've

actually looked at how a polygamous marriage works, I wouldn't want to be the man. I wouldn't want to be the woman either".

In the novel one of the women gives up her femaleness to live as a man. In answer to the question of whether this radical act was based on fact, Forna informs me that this practice has been in existence for many years,

"It happens. There is a system through which a woman can elect to be a man, elect to take on a male role. This existed way before western feminism. Way before women in Britain were wearing dock martens and cropping their hair, this African society had a system in which women could say 'you know what, this doesn't really suit me'".

To further clarify she adds, "It's far more complex and subtle than we have time to talk about, but yes, a woman usually in middle age might decide that she wants more of a public life, the lives of women don't really hold much for her and that's the way she wants to go, and sometimes women are asked. What it says to me is that Africans in that society realized that gender was a construct - it was role based not biologically based - and so they kind of said, 'ok, some people may not want that, and for a few of you, you can use an opt out', I found that really fascinating".

Q Is there a message she wants to relate concerning the women of that particular region?

"Other than listen - no. What interested me about those women was that I'd never heard their voices. I've heard certain voices in this world ad infinitum, but I haven't heard those voices, so that's what drew me to it, and hopefully that's what will draw other people to it".

Having been discouraged early in life from pursuing a career as a novelist, Forna followed the advice given to her at school to "do something sensible" and chose law which in her words, "bored me rigid". Realizing that the sensible path was not for her she veered off and became a journalist. She has worked in the arts, politics, as a documentary filmmaker, a reporter on social affairs for BBC news, a broadcaster, philanthropist and author. So how did she become a novelist?

"I went into writing fiction in steps. I published a memoir which, whilst it was a work of non fiction, it used all the devices of fiction in the arc of the story, and it was after that really, that I decided I wanted to write a novel".

Acknowledging the influence her journalism has had on her current work she admits,

"Some of us who became journalists did so because it was a way to write and be paid. Of course once you get there you realize that it's worlds apart from what

you would like to do - which is sit in a room and write novels, but it does teach you a heck of a lot. I entered so many different lives as a journalist, lives I would never have entered as an ordinary person. I learnt how to interview, I learnt how to ask questions. I was always fascinated with peoples' lives, which is what drew me to those worlds".

She laughs loudly in agreement at the suggestion that maybe all of this entering of other peoples' worlds, is simply a clever ruse to disguise her tendency to be certifiably nosey,

"Yes, very, very, nosey, obsessively nosey. I'm awful. If I'm left alone in somebody's study I have to kind of sit on my hands otherwise I start rummaging. I just ask my friends, 'do you mind if I start noseing' and they say, 'no, no be my guest', and leave me there while they go off and make coffee".

Having engaged in both factual and fictional writing, Forna considers both forms equally challenging,

"People think that writing non-fiction is this easy thing to do, but it's tremendously difficult, both forms are tremendously difficult. I find writing really rather agonizing. The Devil That Danced on the Water was particularly difficult because there were gaps in the story and I had to make it work. I did as much research for each book, but you do it in a slightly different way".

She explains,

"The first book was forensic research. I went out to find what had happened to my father in the year after which I last saw him, so you know what you're looking for and you're going to find it, to find answers, to seek a certain kind of truth. When you're researching a novel you're simply opening yourself up to listening to what people have to say and their stories - putting yourself in different worlds, trying to think like the people in those worlds, you're not seeking a kind of a to z path".

The notion of truth is something that crops up in many of the reviews of Ancestor Stones, and in one article Forna is quoted as saying that she wanted to, 'create characters who told other kinds of truth',

"For me non-fiction tells literal truth, this happened at this time, on this date to the best account of the memories, notes, and research of the writer and subjects. Fiction tells a different kind of truth about the human experience - it's the idea of the universal truth. Now I don't know exactly what is meant by the universal truth other than what I think which is, we're all born kind of little shriveled smelly things and somehow under the heavens we all plop into a different place. And I think it serves us very well to know what our lives might have been like if we hadn't been born into the middle class western world. So I mean those two things by another kind of truth - the truth

in terms of how fiction writers see it as opposed to the literal truth, but I also mean other stories other truths about the way in which people see the same world".

Describing herself as naturally inquisitive, she confesses that she was the type of child who questioned everything,

"The kind of kid that goes 'yeah, but why?' and is not satisfied with 'just because'. I suppose I've always wanted to know how the world works, why things happen the way they happen".

She tributes this thirst for knowledge and deep-rooted belief in the ability of individuals to affect positive change, to her father - who for most of her life was a political prisoner in Sierra Leone,

"My father was very much of that mindset that you should do at least one good thing. So I guess it came from there, I mean he definitely felt you could create change".

"One good thing" Forna has done, is build the Rogbonko Village School, in her family's village. Of this impressive achievement she insists modestly,

"I think you simply have to listen to what you're being asked for in this world. Just listen to what you're being asked for around you, that's where you should put your energy. They asked me to help educate the kids, I knew them and so I had to".

Despite the many hats she wears, when asked which one she chooses to define herself, Forna answers swiftly and with conviction,

"I'm a writer and everything else happens on the side".

Q So what would she offer as the single most important piece of advice to all the aspiring writers who are currently reading this?

"Well he won't thank me for telling this story, but I remind him of it often. I have a friend, we were both journalists together, and we were perusing the new success of one of our kin who had written a novel, and lamenting our lives as stuck in a job that we wanted to leave, and this friend turned round to me and said, 'what's so great about his novel anyway, all he did was do it'. And I went away and thought - actually he didn't just sit around going, 'O I want to write a novel', he got to the end of it".

She remarks finally,

"I've met a thousand people, I've heard a thousand ideas, and I've heard a lot of people say 'I'm beginning', 'I'm writing', but the number of them who have actually finished something is really minute. It's that breaking through the fear barrier to just keep putting the sentences on the page one day at a time, and to just keep on going without knowing how it's all going to be at the end. And that's it - you just have to be a finisher. Just go with it, finish it, and then you are a writer".