

MYSTERY READERS JOURNAL

The Journal of Mystery Readers International®

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Mysteries Set in Africa



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Janet A. Rudolph, Editor • Kate Derie, Associate Editor

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1988 and is currently in print on Amazon.)

Rift is a fictional account of the same journey: a young, rather romantic woman, escaping a winter fuel crisis in England, takes a temporary job with a film unit in Nairobi and decides to travel north when the job ends. She thinks she is independent and adventurous—a mistake many of us make when first visiting a very strange land.

She isn't me, but we share some of the same characteristics. The route, however, is the same, the key events and places are the same, as are many of the people she meets on the way.

Of course *Rift*, being fiction, is a little more obviously dramatic. And I, being a crime writer, added the elements of a mystery surrounding the death of an American tourist. What doesn't change, though, is how it feels to be a white foreigner trying, day to day, to survive circumstances she doesn't understand, unable to do

anything about very real miseries and deaths that occur in an almost commonplace way during a revolution and a famine.

My respect for the tough, dignified way people survive such hardships knows no bounds and has remained with me. Even now I am part of project called Femlead trying to improve the lives of young girls and women in one rural region of Uganda. Try Googling us on Femlead.org to see what can result from a disastrous journey nearly five decades ago.

I'd thought that writing the novel might exorcise a little of the 'survivor's guilt' I felt given the real-life experience. But for better or worse, the repercussions are still on my mind.

Liza Cody was born in London and sets most of her work there. Her informative website is www.LizaCody.com.

Green Snake in Green Grass by Kathy Curnow

I decided to marry my love of mystery writing to my academic pursuit of African art history, and a series about Nigeria's Benin Kingdom sprang to mind. I had a historical background story—a real prince named Esigie and his teenaged rivalry with his brother. This late 15th/early 16th-century royal has been the focus of my research for decades, and I've collected oral histories about him from many Benin chiefs and courtiers. But since I had no plans to murder him, I needed to create an imaginary victim and flesh out my detective.

Initially I planned to have a young man be my investigator—someone who wanted to become a chief like his late father, who was familiar with the court and its intrigues. Ohio is his nickname—it means "pride." But another figure kept edging in. She's a young teen named Orhue ("chalk" or joy), often left to her own devices. I made her Ohio's younger half-sister, whose relationship with him is fraught with avoidance and irritation. The two provide glimpses of what it's

like to grow up in a polygamous household, and how a difference in age and gender often rend possibilities of genuine familial closeness. Each chapter alternates the voices of Ohio and Orhue, illustrating very different outlooks for the 28-year-old man and his 14-year-old half-sibling.

Ohio must deal with his four wives, the source of incessant quarrels:

Iy'Ekan sauntered in, hips and nostrils twitching. She was a very unwelcome interruption. She neither greeted me nor knelt down, just clattered the dishes by my mat and started arranging herself for a meal. I was still standing! The woman is mannerless, especially when she imagines herself injured.

With great control, I spoke to her. "Will you get yourself and your food out of my room? And while you're at it, why not go and visit your mother for some lessons on how wives should behave to their husbands!"

I didn't even raise my voice, but from the pull to her mouth you'd think I'd insulted every one of her forebears the way they deserve to be insulted. She left with a hiss.

Orhue is uneasy about her future, and marriage thoughts make her skittish:

Eronmwon was sweeping the corner of the compound, and came running when she saw me.

"Orhue!"

She embraced me. She's very much for shouting and hugging and exclaiming, and, as I thought, never spared a moment to wonder why I was visiting. I helped her pack the brushings in a big plantain leaf and throw them over the wall, then we settled down in a corner. We're the same age, but she's much taller than I am, with better beads. She was also wearing an Olokun necklace, the cowrie-laden pendant showing she'd already been initiated. She saw me looking.

"I haven't seen you in weeks! See—I've just finished doing my Olokun. Lucky it happened before Uncle died. You know I'm betrothed? To Edohen's second son. We'll be married soon, but I want to wait until my hair grows out after the funeral. I suppose I could wear a ram's hair wig, but..." Her eyes looked into the distance, measuring the effect of wig versus natural but short locks.

She hadn't shaved her head yet, nor had the other women. But it wouldn't be long, for it's an important part of mourning. But see girls and marriage! Her very own uncle was murdered the day before, and already her thoughts were of hair and marriage feasts and dancing.

I based their personalities and those of the other candidates on actual people (or their composites) whom I knew, which enabled them to stay consistent and grow over time. But those are identities that must stay confidential.

Ohio is reluctantly pulled into investigating an important chief's death. Political ramifications make him hesitate—factions are already forming behind rival princes who might be the future monarch. Supporting the wrong candidate would mean the end of his chieftaincy hopes. Unfortunately for his would-be neutrality, Ohio is distantly related to Prince Esigie's royal mother, and she enlists him as a secret investigator. Some clues point to Portuguese involvement, but suspects abound not only in the victim's own household, but in homes where wives had romped with the chief in the past. Because Orhue has access to household harems, her brother conscripts her services, and they unexpectedly grow closer.

This is a society whose setting, history, and culture are unfamiliar to most readers. How to bring them to life, demonstrating both the universalities of teenage eye-rolling, raw ambition, jealousy, and sexual proclivities, with the specifics of a particular place and time?

I spent nearly twenty years living in Benin on and off. Its weather, festivals, chiefly households, palace, and habits are familiar, and the period's history are all comfortable memories, but I wanted to include speech patterns, class attitudes, and suspicions. That wasn't difficult. Though a modern state capital, Benin City remains an African Byzantium with intrigue infused in the atmosphere. Everyone is a skilled psychologist and wariness among family members, spouses, and friends is only a breath away.

Since I conceived the series in Benin City, I could record turns of phrase and shifts of mistrust. When I needed a title, I honed in on a common descriptor for a deceptive person: green snake in green grass. I knew I also needed to include dream interpretations, which reflect cultural beliefs. On a daily basis, I'd trade dreams with friends who always clarified their meanings. A dream of food? A witch was planning to attack you. Eating food? Too late for you, the witch's plans were underway. Amongst my favorites were

wives' use of fake dreams to influence their husbands' behavior. Want to keep him away from a mistress? Invent a dream in which someone with her characteristics committed an abomination.

I love Benin, and I want to bring readers into the world of its past. Next up? Ohio and Orhue look into the murder of an official palace witch.

Nkisi by Russell Hill

In a museum in San Francisco I encountered an African figure of a man punctured by hundreds of nails. It was an Nkisi, a figure used to settle disputes. A nail symbolized a suspected wrong, perhaps a murder, and drawing out the nail could result in the death of the murderer. Or, the accuser if it were a false charge.

I used that image in a short story, "The Boatman," included in my collection *The Heeler* (2005). A boy from Africa, enrolled in a British private school, puts a nail into his hand while building a set for a school play. He approaches the teacher to have the nail withdrawn. He tells the teacher that he is an Nkisi and the removal of the nail might have serious consequences. They both laugh at the suggestion, the boy explains the history of Nkisi and the teacher withdraws the nail. That's the beginning of the story.

I have found that museums are often places where story ideas are formed. An object like that

Kathy Curnow is a professor of African art history at Cleveland State University. Her academic book about Oba Esigie's use of art and festival as a narrative strategy is under revision for the Smithsonian Scholarly Press. The Ohio Arts Council recently named her a recipient of an Individual Award for Excellence—Fiction.

nail-filled wooden statue conjures up scenes, and a painting of a family with dogs at the master's feet can conjure up characters, their attitudes toward each other suggested by their arrangement in the painting.

In that same museum is a gold filigree crown, fashioned centuries ago and worn by an Egyptian woman. It is delicate and I can imagine the goldsmith fashioning it and then it is placed on the head of a woman who is perhaps a powerful woman or the companion of a powerful man. Every time I pass that case in the museum, I think of that woman wearing that delicate circle of gold.

Russell Hill has been nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe award three times, was a "Discover Great New Writers" selection by Barnes and Noble Books, and is an avid fly fisherman who has written for outdoor magazines. He lives in Northern California.

A Brutal Love Letter by Akbar Hussain

Liminal.

A pompous word, a 'literary' word. And although I have been accused of many things, I can look anyone in the eye and say: 'Never have I ever used this word.'

Yet here I am beginning this piece with it.

Why?

Because I love words, and believe in economy and precision.

And so I say, Kenya is (for me) a liminal

place—inasmuch as I entered it one way, and left it (eight years later) entirely different.

For never had I lived in such a fluid, youthful society, where the weight of identity was carried so lightly (I grew up in Switzerland, Canada and India—and had not really been aware of the creeping cost of having to 'belong'—the subcutaneous and constant decisioning of what identity elements to keep, discard, dial up/down).

Even allowing for the considerable expatriate