



## Aminatta Forna talks to Daneet Steffens about responsible journalism, researching her characters, learning to speak Temne and, yes, even Harry Potter.

‘Let me tell you the story of the stones,’ Aminatta Forna says, sitting forward on the comfy-looking couch in her living room. ‘I was asking my stepmother what people in her village in Sierra Leone believed in before Christianity and Islam, and she said she couldn’t remember because she was brought up Muslim and later converted to Christianity. The only thing that she could recall was about these stones, way before her time. So she took me to see her “co-mother,” one of her father’s wives, who was now living in a council flat in Balham having fled the war in Sierra Leone. And this woman said, yes, her mother had stones but she herself had no idea what they were for. But she knew that they must have meant something because her mother would scatter the stones and talk to them. She said, “I knew they were really important because I always felt that something my father had done with them had led to my mother dying.” Her father had embraced Islam and he had found his wife talking to her stones and he’d picked them up and thrown them away. And my stepmother’s co-mother said, “Three months after that, my mother was dead. She took to her bed and never got up and then died.”’

‘She was sure it was connected to what her father had done with the stones – but she wasn’t sure what the stones were. Then,’ says Forna, the excitement of discovery gleaming in her eye, ‘eight months later, I was reading a paper by a Scottish missionary who’d worked in that exact area in Sierra Leone one hundred years ago, and in this paper he wrote [something to the effect] that “the women here have stones that they worship and divine with and

they represent their ancestors and each woman, on her death, gives a stone to her daughter.” And that was the other half of the story, of what the father had done to the mother.’ Forna pauses for breath, but just barely.

‘And I wanted that character, those characters. I wanted to explore that question of what are you doing to somebody when you just strip away their culture. It’s absolutely what’s happened in Africa and in colonised countries over and over again, stripping away culture, stripping away beliefs, telling people they can’t believe what they’ve always believed, telling them it’s irrelevant, that it doesn’t matter, that now they have to do it *this* way. So that’s where the character of Mariama in *Ancestor*

eyes of one family. From their roots in establishing a coffee plantation, through the disturbing crash-and-burn days of the recent civil war – *Stones* is an unflinching passage through history that expertly evokes the oral traditions and the unique rhythms of rural African life.

That exactitude didn’t happen automatically. A former journalist – Forna worked at the BBC for ten years before leaving in 1999 to write full time – the writer interviewed many women, collecting multiple stories in order to imagine her own, even coaxing her priceless-as-a-resource stepmother to teach her Temne, their family’s language, one summer in London. ‘She’d come for lunch and we’d take the dogs for a walk,’ says Forna, coffee

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*Stones* came from: I wanted somebody who’d gone through that experience of having things taken away from them, then having to find their own way back. She ended up being my favourite because she was the one who saw what had happened, what was happening, that it was all about losing their gods and having to take on those of other people.’

That story gave Forna’s 2006 debut novel, *Ancestor Stones*, its name – and its heart. A mesmerising tale told by four half-sisters – Asana, Hawa, Mariama and Serah – *Stones* captures several decades of Sierra Leonean history through the female

mug in hand, dark hair haloed around her face. Her manner is nothing less than effusive, a vocal, wonderfully energetic woman with whom listening becomes a pleasure. Her eloquence in writing, it strikes me – whether she is turning her hand to fiction, memoir or journalism – is mirrored in the way she speaks. She can tell a story, this one.

‘It was a crash course,’ she agrees. ‘I speak baby Temne really, but what I wanted to be able to do was to recreate the way the women speak, the rhythms. I wanted to capture the thinking and the feel of the language; it’s got a very particular

sound when you hear it spoken and they do a lot of repetitions. The only bit I never cracked was the plurals, so I still have to say, 'Bring me egg, please,' – now she cracks up into full-throated laughter herself – 'many, many egg.'

In fact, the germ of the novel first sprouted while Forna was researching an earlier book, 2002's *The Devil That Danced on the Water*, a gut-and-mind-and-heart-wrenching memoir about her Sierra Leonean father's life. A committed doctor – he married Forna's Scottish mother while studying medicine in Aberdeen – Mohammed Forna was also a political activist and Minister of Finance in his country's early post-colonial government who, in 1975, was brutally executed by the very government he'd worked for.

Having begun work on *Devil* and her family's history while still at the BBC, Forna was temporarily stopped in her Sierra Leonean tracks when

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the civil war there escalated. But only temporarily: once she completed all the research she could outside of Sierra Leone, she got tired of waiting. The country still wasn't deemed officially safe enough to travel to, but she went anyway, pursuing critical research – and finding inspiration for her first novel along the way. 'I wanted to speak with this aunt of mine because everyone told me, "She's the one who will know,"' Forna says slowly. The sun is pouring into this airy, high-ceilinged room, illuminating a mix of African and London life, pretty wooden floors and flowery-tiled Victorian fireplaces. At one end, a large window overlooks a cheerful garden – English cottage style, Forna calls it, with 'that sort of managed-neglect look' – while at another, an even larger window overlooks an idyllic South London street. But Forna has a very different room in her mind's eye: 'So I went to her,' she continues. 'My cousin Morlai was translating for me and we were both gripped by her stories and I knew absolutely the minute that I heard her voice that I was going to write it: that voice of old Africa, of those women, of that life that I knew nothing about until she started telling me those stories. I had never ever read a book in the voice of a rural African woman of that class ever, ever, ever, ever. I thought, "This has never been written, this has never been told.'"

Until the age of 11, Forna lived variously between Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Scotland, but spent the 20-odd years after her father's death primarily in England, educated at Malvern Girls' College and taking a law degree at University College London. Having dreamed of being a vet

as a child – 'I was crap at sciences, so that was the end of that' – she was excited enough by writing classes to tell her careers advisor that she wanted to be a writer. The advisor's response? It was very hard to make a career as a writer; maybe Forna might consider something more modest, a career in translation perhaps? 'I mean,' exclaims Forna, jaw dropping at the audacity of it all. 'I was brought up to *win!* By *that* father!?' So I just looked at her and said, "Well, no, I rather think I'd like to write the books that *are* translated!"

From the mid-80s she fashioned a career as a freelance journalist – a column in *Girl About Town* here, writing for *The Guardian* there – into a coveted reporting post at the BBC. She worked on various current affairs and arts programmes including *Public Eye* and *The Late Show*, but ultimately found working at a large news organisation constraining: 'It was hard to break the mould on

the thinking.' Her 1998 book, *Mother of all Myths*, a robust assessment of the guilt and expectations heaped on mothers – which remains, by the way, alarmingly relevant more than a decade on – grew directly out of that frustration. 'As reporters,' she says, 'we were taking researched studies and turning them into scaremongering stories. I felt they deserved to be presented in a different way, in a more knowing way; that, as journalists, we should be bringing some understanding to them.'

She brings this understanding to bear in her work, imbuing all of her writing with a sure-handed mix of sensibility and compassion that breathes compelling readability and life into it. Nonfictional *Devil* is palpably marked with a novelist's eye – and an experienced writer's exhilarating sense of release: 'It was a liberation to be able to write as I could as opposed to how I had to,' she affirms. 'It was telling stories as opposed to writing in BBC-speak.'

*Ancestor Stones* proved to be another experience entirely ('It's so terrifying writing a novel! Like walking a tightrope across Niagara Falls for two years!'). Mapping out a fictional story leaves Forna cold; she prefers to start with characters, just writing in their voices. 'Some days I didn't have anything at all. I'd just have to sit down and let the characters talk and see where it went. That's quite hard for a journalist because you usually sit down with your whole story in front of you, ready to write. With fiction, that just stymies me. I really do have to let it just go, the writing, and that's the scariest thing – to say, "I'm not going to work this out in advance." But it gives you the freedom to go wherever you need to go.'

She does, conversely, pursue her creative stories with the determination and focus that she honed as a journalist, adding her own Forna touch: absolute immersion. Her second novel, which she is currently writing, features a minor character from *Stones*. 'What happened, was that I hurt my Achilles tendon running down the beach in my bikini.' Peals of laughter. 'In Sierra Leone.' More laughter. 'To my abject shame,' she says, shaking her head. 'I was taken to hospital, and was fascinated by what I saw. I was writing *Stones* at the time, so I created Adrian, a counsellor, and got really interested in him.' She got permission to spend time observing at the hospital and shadowed a young Sierra Leonean surgeon, ultimately an inspiration for her second novel. 'Then somebody told me that they knew the guy who ran the psychiatric clinic at the hospital. So I got to hang around the loony bin for a couple of weeks and that's where I decided that the main character for my next novel was going to be a psychologist – and it was going to be Adrian.'

'Even as a reporter,' she confirms, 'I couldn't believe the pleasure of going off to people's houses and work places, looking at how they lived and did things. When I'm doing that I always think, "There is nothing I want to do more than to do *this*," whatever is in front of me at the time, holding my attention, fascinating me. I'm too old to be a surgeon, but I can try it on for a while, see what it feels like. You're not born a journalist,' – she grins, that laughter bubbling up again – 'you're born a Nosy Parker!'

She immerses herself just as intently while writing – though she admits succumbing to various 'displacement activities': 'When you write, you are entering this long dream which you are going to stay in all day, and you're holding on to all these points of reference, these thoughts, these ideas,' – she indicates each one, nipping at the air with her hands – 'and if somebody talks to you, they'll all be blown away. I think it's that isolation that's tremendously important to allow you to get into that place, to not be interrupted by ordinary daily chores.' She stops, rethinks. 'Sometimes, of course, it helps to go off and do some chores: I do a lot of housework while I'm writing, but what I'm actually doing is letting my mind tick over. And quite often I'll think, "That's it! That's the next bit!" and I'll leave, say, the laundry load half in-half out and go back and write. Quite often you have to take yourself away from the thing you are doing in order to get back into it. I know that my husband, opening the door of my study and finding me looking at Diane Von Furstenberg frocks on eBay, is going to be quite convinced that I'm not writing – but I am! And a lot of my writing friends do that: they might be sitting there watching TV, or doing whatever, but, "It doesn't mean I'm not writing!" You are, you're doing it all the time.'

Sometimes when she's blocked, she'll jump ahead to write a scene that she knows is coming – 'the thing I find the hardest to write is transitions; I

may know what's going to happen next, but I don't always know how I'm going to get there' – allowing the elusive 'bridge scene' to suggest itself. Also a challenge: 'Moving your story through time and not labouring through every detail,' she says. 'I'm properly impressed when it's done beautifully; I think finding elegant and original ways to move through time is very difficult. It's about being able to write summary in a way that's really interesting.'

One area that doesn't terrify her, clearly, is venturing into new writing territories – and Forna would like to see more women doing so. She admires Pat Barker for 'the courage simply to step into a world so different from her own. I think women constrain themselves quite a lot, are constrained by the industry which always expects you to write a "woman's" novel. There's quite a lot of pressure to produce something that is going to be clever chick lit.'

She's been lucky to avoid that pressure herself, but does realise that it's due to her chosen subject matter, writing about Africa, writing about war – the latter traditionally a male area. But she acknowledges that her writing about these subjects can take its toll.

'The violence of war is perpetuated upon the bodies of women – women's experience of war is really about rape. So the other day, I had been reading a whole load of eyewitness reports from refugee camps, and then I sat down to write. By the end of the day I felt really bad, really bleak and depressed. I think it's difficult, if you're living with a writer, to understand how real their writing world becomes to them. I find it quite hard to shake myself out of

it sometimes, and I think it makes me quite difficult to live with. Sometimes my husband is baffled as to why he's come home and his wife is in such a...'. She laughs and pauses. 'I think I'll take a little break after this one. I do find the emotional drain phenomenal.' She glances out of the window, and nods. 'I'm going to go off and do a bit of teaching, maybe write some short stories maybe write for radio – try a new format. I'm at the beginning of what I hope is the end of this book.' And she cheerfully scrambles to touch wood.

Forna now spends a few months a year in Sierra Leone. In her family's village, Rogbonko, she's helped to establish a school, and relishes the potential cross-cultural exchanges that loom: At a recent London party, Bloomsbury head Nigel Newton promised to give every child in her school a complete set of Harry Potter books. 'So I took 900 Harry Potter books to Sierra Leone, up to this village in the middle of nowhere; we had so many books that we shared them with the nine surrounding schools.' She smiles. 'All the time I was researching *Stones*, I kept coming across these ideas rammed in by colonials and Western education and Islam and Christianity, that believing in spirits, believing in witchcraft was primitive, not civilised. And here is the highest-selling book in the world that comes from the West and what is it? It's a story of wizards! I find that very entertaining – I'll see what the kids make of it when I head back.'

AMINATTA FORNA was born in 1964 and lives in London with her husband, furniture designer Simon Westcott. For more information on the Rogbonko Village School, visit [www.aminattaforna.com](http://www.aminattaforna.com).



#### My first memory

'is of my dog Jack choking to death with a bone stuck down his throat. My father trying to save him. That, and the taste of chocolate milk.'

#### My first writing

'was a creation myth. Ambitious, if nothing else.'

#### Thanks to...

'my elder brother and sister for considering me too uncool to hang out with. I learned to entertain myself by living in my imagination.'



#### The first book that affected me

'was *White Fang*. I read it when I was about eight or nine. I reread it again last year, and realised it was really not a book for children at all and engages some very tough themes. My parents never censored my reading, the way I find a lot of parents do now. I still marvel at Jack London's skill in creating a narrative from an animal's perspective and retaining it – unwaveringly. I found I could remember entire passages.'

## 100 ways to write a book: \*38 The Forna method

- » Write down ideas, write everything down; you think you'll remember it but you don't, you forget it, so write everything down.
- » Keep notebooks everywhere, it saves you having to leave the room – especially if you are mid-conversation with someone. You still have to leave the conversation briefly, but at least you don't have to get up and leave the other person alone in the room.
- » If you get an idea for a story or a scene, make a note of it; at some point you'll look back and think, 'It's time for that scene now.'
- » Don't be afraid; allow yourself to fade to white.... in a film you fade to black, in a novel you fade to white. That's something that you learn: you don't even have to have an action, you don't have to have someone stomp out or slam a door, you can just fade to white. You can end on the last sentence of the dialogue and...it's a page space. Fade to white.
- » Don't be afraid to wander into unknown writing territory.
- » Lay firm groundwork: put in the time and effort of research, find your characters, then sit down and write.
- » Don't let planning stymie you. If you start with one structure and find yourself stuck, let the characters show you the way, let them lead you through the story. Sit down, let them talk and see where it goes.
- » Focus on all your admin-y things to get that out of the way first thing in the morning, so that you don't have to think about them once you start to write.
- » A lot of coffee tends to be involved, sometimes a slow start.
- » Enjoy your dogs. Relish having a silent companion in the house, someone there, but not someone who's going to intrude on your thoughts.
- » When you get stuck, it can be quite useful to go back and work on what you've already written. Perhaps the story has slightly changed since you wrote that chapter? 'Housekeeping' work – revisiting, editing – keeps you going with the flow.
- » Go off and read something inspirational. ('Michael Ondaatje almost always gets me in the mood to write. I can read a paragraph of Michael Ondaatje and I can suddenly think "Yeah!"').
- » Allow elements of a story you are currently working on to emerge as fodder for new stories of their own.
- » If you are stuck on how to get from one scene to the next, go ahead and jump into the next scene, start writing and look behind you. The bridge may well have fallen naturally into place.



PHOTO: DANEET STEFFENS