

The Ugandan Writer, Doreen Baingana

In the Shadow of Idi Amin

Helen Fallon

Doreen Baingana, in *Tropical Fish*, through the medium of eight interlinked stories, traces the lives, from adolescence to adulthood, of three members of an upperclass Ugandan family. The fictional sisters, Patti, Rosa and Christine, like Baingana herself, grew up during the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin.

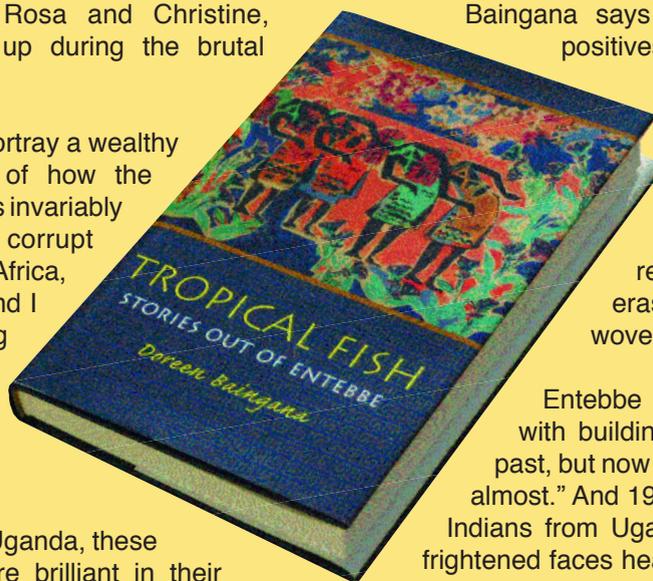
Talking about her decision to portray a wealthy Ugandan family, she spoke of how the portrayal of Africa in the media is invariably negative: “Wars, disease, corrupt government. And yes, that is Africa, but it’s not the whole story...And I have never seen my upbringing and the upbringing of many people like me written down.”

THINGS NOT AS THEY SEEM

Set against the lush beauty of Uganda, these compelling stories – which are brilliant in their detail – portray a family life full of people and activity. In *Green Stones*, we see Christine mesmerised by the beads and necklaces – gifts from her father, a prosperous government accountant – she finds in her mother’s bedroom. While her mother is out she adorns herself with the jewels, imagining herself in another world.

As an adult she finds herself surprised to see her nieces playing with these former treasures, realising that “the glass and stones and beads were much smaller than they used to be. The pearls were a

ghastly plastic, peeling even, like children’s garish toys. I ran my hands on my favourite... But no longer was it made of the royal stones.”



Baingana says she wants to “highlight the positives, such as the closeness of families and how people deal with political chaos around them and still create a somewhat normal life.” Idi Amin is “an ever-present ghost. The effects of his regime will take many years to erase.” These effects are subtly woven into the stories.

Entebbe is referred to as a city “filled with buildings that had been alive in the past, but now were small and irrelevant ruins, almost.” And 1972, when Amin expelled all the Indians from Uganda, is recalled: “busloads of frightened faces heading down Circular Road past St. John’s Church to the International Airport”.

LURKING TRAGEDY

In *Hunger*, Patti, the second sister, writes a diary while at boarding school. Beset with feelings of alienation and yearning, both physical and spiritual, she says, “God says we suffer for a reason. What reason? Maybe, just maybe, God will answer my prayers and Mama will come and see me this evening.”

But Patti’s mother is too busy to come. Her husband has lost his job as a result of his drinking. “It was announced on TV that he had been retired in the public

interest. I don't want to describe that shame. Sure, everybody's worse off after Idi Amin's regime, but we shouldn't have been." In an effort to find meaning in her life, Patti becomes a born-again Christian at fourteen, finding some solace in her faith.

A Thank-You Note is written in the form of a letter from twenty year-old Rosa to her boyfriend and fellow student David. In the letter she tells him, "We could have been the Romeo and Juliet of the tropics, with disease, not family, as the enemy of love." David has given her the Aids virus.

Baingana is possibly the first African woman to write, in fictionalised form, about Aids: "this slow invisible spread, like a harmless cloud from afar, has turned into an invasion of insatiable locusts, a cruel blanket covering us all."

After completing a law degree at Makerere University, Baingana travelled to Italy in 1989. She began to write long letters home, "letters describing everything, because everything was different – the water tasted different – and it was new and exciting to me. I would get lost in these letters I was writing." She went to the United States in 1991 with the intention of furthering her legal studies. However, she began to go to poetry readings and to write, changing direction from law to literature and completing a Masters in Fine Arts at the University of Maryland.

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Like Baingana, Christine, the youngest of the three sisters, in Questions of Home, travels to the United States. Living in Los Angeles, she finds "everything works and is automatic, there's less and less need to talk. My salary mysteriously enters my account. I find a window machine and punch in some numbers. Out slips money silently, smoothly. It must be mine... There's no need to talk to anyone."

Christine returns home after twelve years in America to find little has changed in Uganda and encounters new challenges in adapting to her homeland. "How on Earth had she thought she could live at home with Mama? Back in the States, after a hard day of fake smiles and isolation, alone in her apartment at night, Christine had imagined the three of them, with Patti, as close companions growing older together, serenely



Doreen Baingana's collection of short stories, Tropical Fish: Stories Out Of Entebbe was the winner of the Associated Writers and Writing Programs Award for Short Fiction in 2003. Doreen also won the Washington Independent Writers Fiction Prize in 2004, and was a finalist for the Caine Prize in 2004. She teaches at the Writers Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

(Photo:Mario Ritter)

sipping tea or shelling a large basket of fresh peas, smiling. The proverbial strong African family."

She finds comfort in nature: "these disorganized gardens where life unleashed itself every which way. They were the exact opposite of the tiny rectangular patches of immaculate green lawns back in the U.S. that had to be watered, fertilized, fenced off, teased and begged to grow. One day, all this vibrancy, this living chaos, would be normal again. One day. But this meant she wouldn't notice it anymore...She would have to learn all over again how to live in this new old place called home."

Doreen Baingana now lives in the United States. She is writer in residence at the University of Maryland, visits Uganda frequently and says of herself, "I belong to both Uganda and the United States." ■

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