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Swallowing Stones

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Why did you decide to write the book as an autobiography, in Otto's voice, rather than as a more straightforward biography? Was it difficult to capture his voice on the page?

Every time I heard Otto telling me his story or bits of what are in the book, he told me in the first person. To get into the character completely, I found I had to go by the one route I really knew, which was his voice, his first person recollection. It seemed natural to build on his voice, so to speak.

Is the real Oswaldo given to great quips such as, "oratory, like bagpipe music, is best played at a distance and to a crowd"?

Yes, the real Otto is given to wonderful quips. He also loathes bagpipe music.

Among the many intriguing and thought-provoking sentences in this book is the line, "things just happened... I don't know if that is my particular fate or if it is that of twentieth century man in general." Could you expound on this please?

I also found it one of the most thought-provoking parts of the real Otto's story, which is why I use it twice in the novel. It links back to the core of the story, to the concept of 'chance and necessity,' and it underlines the randomness of events that have or could have changed our lives. I believe that in the, in many ways, less-structured society in which we live, particularly in the Western World, most of us do not know what behavior is appropriate, expected, or necessary from day to day or in moments of crisis. It is as though we are the blind leading the blind, hoping for the best but repeatedly leaping in the dark. Even a cursory study of 20th century history shows a repeating pattern of random actions shaping our world. Although there have always been elements of this, maybe as we develop technologically at such comparatively break-neck speed, this element of things just happening rather than being planned, designed or formally executed has increased.

How do books and literature figure in your friendship with Otto? Did he really find you as irritating as the fictionalized Oswaldo finds Veta?

Books and literature play a role of enormous importance within our friendship. And as a teenager, I irritated the real Otto to the point of desperation. It took 2 years for us to become friends and that was due very much to his almost constant wrath at my almost constant inanity.

Which books and authors have had the greatest influence on your own writing?

Andre Schwarz Bart's *A Woman Named Solitude*, Ousmane Sembene's *Le Mandat*, much of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Vicente Huidobro's poetry, Jorge Ibarquenoitia's *The Lightning of August*, (which directly influenced the tone of 'constant denial' of my 'Otto', George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, Harriet Wilson, and the Malien master, Amidou Hampate BA: Then there are a host of biographies, many of them 19th century. Nabokov's *Speak Memory*. I have been very influenced by both poetry and theatre, Paul Celan in the former category and Harold Pinter and Shakespeare in the latter.