



## Beverley Naidoo

**Burn My Heart**  
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### Burn My Heart Interview with Beverley Naidoo

#### What was the inspiration for *Burn My Heart*?

I think it was deeply layered, but I found this among my first notes: *Story within story. Burying shame. Father and son. Man and boy. Friendship. Betrayal. Father buries story from childhood . . . But unearths it and tells it to son who is in process of betraying a friend. Burn My Heart* began as a story that a father has buried. A guilty secret. In the course of writing, I removed this "outer" story so that there is no visible narrator. My reader steps directly into 1951, shifting between Mathew and Mugo. However, the story at the core remains one that has been largely hidden under the dust of the past. Power corrupts the truth as much by silence as by assertion. What do colonizers of other people's lands tell their children? What do they *not* tell them? How different are the stories told by parents whose lands are occupied and dominated? Our parents' stories help to shape us. Do you remember the first shock at hearing a story that contradicted a parent or trusted adult? Stories, like

experience, can plant seeds of change. We do not have to be fixed. **Does the story relate to your own childhood and background?**

I grew up as a white child in Johannesburg, South Africa, two thousand miles south of Kenya, at the time of the Mau Mau. I would have heard what most children in Britain would have heard about the terror and nothing about the struggle to regain land, equal rights, and freedom. I had an older cousin who had married and gone to live on a large farm in Kenya's highlands. After Kenya's independence, her family came to live in South Africa: Her youngest son, Neil, was born during the Emergency in 1953, the year when *Burn My Heart* ends. He was ten when they arrived in South Africa, where most white people continued to support white domination and apartheid. My cousin's family moved to the Cape, and I didn't meet them at the time. It was 1964, the year that Nelson Mandela and his comrades were sentenced to life imprisonment. It was a time of arrests, detention without trial, and torture. I was caught up in this, but I was still a "small fish." I had been fortunate to have had my ways of seeing challenged by my older brother and university friends. I had realized that if I didn't actively join the resistance, I would continue to be complicit in apartheid and its evils. My few weeks in jail were part of my education. For black South Africans the whole country was a vast jail. In 1965, my brother and various friends were set to spend several years in jail and I left for England. I thought I would be returning, but my study abroad turned into twenty-six years of exile. On February 5, 1982, I was listening to BBC news when I heard that a twenty-eight-year-old doctor, Neil Aggett, had been found hanging in his cell at police headquarters in Johannesburg. I rang my mother. Yes, it was Neil, my cousin's son. He had been working in a hospital two nights a week and most of his time as an unpaid trade union organizer. Although he was one of many detainees who died after torture by apartheid's brutal security police, he was the first white person to meet this fate. Desmond Tutu, then Bishop of Johannesburg, conducted Neil's funeral service. Many thousands of black workers followed his coffin through the streets to the cemetery, singing songs of resistance and freedom, just as they would have honored a black comrade. Who could have predicted this transformation for a *mzungu* child born into a settler family at the height of the Emergency in Kenya? **How did you feel when you won the Carnegie**

#### **Medal for *The Other Side of Truth*?**

Disbelief at first . . . then utter elation! This was the first book with African origin and characters to have won the Carnegie in sixty-four years. In my acceptance speech I said: *It matters to me deeply that in acknowledging this book, you are acknowledging the existence of a submerged world of refugees in our very midst. Equally, I am honored that you are acknowledging my particular writer's map to provide a route into that world. I am very aware of how Africa, the continent of my origin, has shaped so much of my writing.* **What has been the response to your books from your readers?**

I receive many letters from readers who appear to have been startled and moved. Often readers write, "I didn't know that . . ." or they ask, "Is it really true that . . . ?" I reply that although the wider situations are real, my characters are all imagined. Some readers, however, recognize experiences. A London schoolboy wrote to me after reading *Web of Lies: The similarities between the lives of Femi and myself left me wondering. Wondering how two people can be so similar, wondering how you know so much about what young boys are going through. . .* **What advice would you give to young people who want to be writers?**

Read the world! Don't confine yourself. Discover what extraordinary journeys can be made through ink on paper, including journeys into the mind and heart. Alert your senses to your own world around you. Observe the detail. Be curious, especially about people. Ask "Why?" Keep a notebook. Play with words. . . . For answers to some more frequently asked questions, visit [www.beverleynaidoo.com](http://www.beverleynaidoo.com).