

From the Editor

By Lyn Miller-Lachmann



At the end of April I attended five events at the PEN World Voices Festival in New York City and covered them as a festival blogger. (My reports may be read on my member page, www.pen.org/MemberProfile.php/prmProfileID/45876.) Among them were Nicaraguan novelist and former vice-president Sergio Ramirez's reading of his newly translated novel *A Thousand Deaths Plus One* (McPherson & Co., 2009); a panel discussion of writers who were former political prisoners from Burma, the Philippines, South Korea, and the United States; and a reading titled "Defiance: The Spirit of '89," which evoked the image of the Chinese man who stopped the tanks outside Tienanmen Square. One of the more interesting sessions I attended, however, was a panel discussion for high school students titled "Personal Evolutions/Social Revolution."

Most of the speakers were familiar to readers of *MultiCultural Review*—Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat, whose works of fiction, memoir, and children's literature have been reviewed in *MCR* and who was interviewed in the Fall 1997 issue following the publication of *The Farming of Bones* (Soho Press, 1997); Haitian author Dany Lafèriere, who now lives in Montreal; and Moroccan-born rising star Laila Lalami, whose *Secret Son* is reviewed in this issue. Joining them were Irish author Colum McCann and moderator Benjamin Anastas.

The students in attendance came from three public high schools in New York City. Many were skeptical at first, but the authors' presentations won them over. By the end of the session, dozens had raised their hands to ask questions, and afterward, they roamed the courtyard at the Instituto Cervantes looking for donated copies of the panelists' books and photo ops with the authors.

Both Danticat and Lafèriere talked about the problems they faced writing from within the Haitian community, and moderator Anastas asked the panelists about the insider/outsider debate. Having published the symposium of three articles in the Spring 2009 issue of *MCR*, I was aware of the challenges faced by outsiders. McCann addressed this question as well, when he talked about the shortcomings of *Zoli* (Random House, 2007), a novel he set in a Roma community at the end of the Second World War. He admitted that there were things he didn't know about the characters and their lives, aspects he could have conveyed more effectively had he written from the inside.

Danticat warned the audience that writing from the inside carries its perils as well, notably being seen as a spokesperson for a culture. Lafèriere described enduring criticism from his fellow Haitians in Montreal, who wanted him to write work that was more political—and less obsessed with sex. Lalami, who didn't begin writing fiction until she had left Morocco for graduate school in linguistics in the United States, said that writing in English offered her a neutral space, as the choice between French and Arabic—her first two languages—was fraught with political and class connotations. However, when she returned to Morocco while writing *Secret Son*, the novel-in-progress took on new levels of vividness, specificity, and insight.

The five South Asian authors featured in Sandhya Nankani's article, "Rising Tide: The Boom in Historical Fiction About India and the Indian Diaspora" are insiders writing about their heritage. The British author Mary Finn tells the story of a mixed-race Anglo-Indian teenager living in Calcutta in the late eighteenth century

Editor-in-Chief
Lyn Miller-Lachmann
mcreview@aol.com

Managing Editor
Deb Goldman

Creative Director
Ed Luiso

Copy Editor
Jane Lerner

Advertising Director
The Goldman Group, Inc.
Deb Goldman
deb@ggpubs.com
813-949-0054

Publisher
The Goldman Group, Inc.
Todd Goldman
todd@ggpubs.com
PO Box 270
Lutz, FL 33559
813-949-0054

African/African-American
Studies Editor
Itibari M. Zulu

Asian/Asian-American Editor
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in *Anila's Journey*. Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner*, Padma Venkatraman's *Climbing the Stairs*, and Mitali Perkins's *Secret Keeper* explore twentieth-century Indian history before and after independence. In *Child of Dandelions*, Shenaaz Nanji portrays an Indian family living in Uganda, forced to flee as a result of Idi Amin's coup. Nankani explains how these insiders are able to present India's history in a way that earlier outsiders—many of whose works remain on school reading lists—are unable to do. Perhaps it is time to revise those reading lists.

In New York City with my daughter at the end of March, I noticed groups of young Japanese tourists strolling through designer shops and standing outside popular hip-hop clubs. They made me think of Masanori Isaka's article, "Today's Black Ships: The Cultural and Economic Impacts of the Japanese Hip-Hop Movement." In the article, Isaka traces the origins of Japanese hip-hop, paralleling its development to other cases in which the Japanese have adopted and transformed American business models. He offers a fascinating study in cross-cultural artistic and economic development.

Michigan journalist Weam Namou, who was born in Iraq but came to the United States as a young child, had little knowledge of the Iraqi-American artists living in her state until she began to promote her first novel, *The Feminine Art* (Hermiz Publishing, 2004). Since then, she has become president of the Iraqi Artists Association, a nonprofit association that promotes the work of artists born in Iraq who live in the United States and Canada. In "The Concealed Gift of Our Society: The United States Gives Iraqi Artists a Voice," she interviews five artists, four men and one woman, representing three generations, Muslim and Christian religious traditions, and a variety of experiences in Iraq and in their adopted countries.

As the United States has provided a refuge and new opportunities for Iraqi artists, so it is home for many Jews who survived the Holocaust and Eastern Europeans fleeing Communism. Vladimir Wertsman, who left his native Romania in the early 1960s, focuses on those courageous Romanians and Moldovans who helped Jews to hide or escape during the Second World War. These Righteous Gentiles represent a range of occupations, from royalty to humble farmers, and their stories are often fascinating, as they devised clever strategies to save their neighbors. The testimony of one Romanian Holocaust survivor, delivered to the United Nations in January 2009, is presented in a special box and honors the contribution of Righteous Gentle Dr. Traian Popovici, the mayor of Czernowitz who saved nearly 20,000 Jews from deportation.

This issue's regular column on recommended books in Spanish for children and adolescents is Isabel Schon's first as founder and director of the Isabel Schon International

Center for Spanish Books for Youth at the San Diego Public Library. She reports that she is settling into her new position and continues to make available the largest selection of children's and young adult books in Spanish in the United States.

"Continuing Diversity" returns to *MCR* following a brief hiatus. Contributed by D. Waheedah Bilal, "Continuing Diversity" highlights a special issue of *The Southern Quarterly*, commemorating the Emmett Till murder case in 1955 and its legacy. 🌐

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Lyn's Blog and Web Site

Editor-in-Chief Lyn Miller-Lachmann has a new web site and blog! Please stop by for a visit at <http://web.mac.com/lynml>.