

## *Little Bee* - Q&A

Here is the inside track on *Little Bee* - everything from the true stories surrounding the novel right through to discussion of its characters and themes. These are the questions that readers and interviewers have been asking me, and I've tried to answer them as best as I can. I hope you'll find this helpful.

Thanks to all the readers who've sent me questions. Thanks to Doubleday and Simon & Schuster for their input too. Special thanks to Daniel Goldin at Boswell Books - some of the best questions are from an interview I did with him.

**Where can I learn more about the real world of refugees and asylum seekers?**

I recommend two extraordinary non-fiction books as a good entry point. The first is *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah, a veteran of the conflict in Sierra Leone. The second is *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees* by Caroline Moorehead, an excellent and dedicated journalist. There are also some websites that are good starting points for research, and I've listed these on my own website at [www.chriscleave.com](http://www.chriscleave.com).

**Why is the novel called "The Other Hand" in the UK, Australia and India and "Little Bee" in the US and Canada?**

It's quite common for novels to change titles when they cross the Atlantic. I like both the titles the novel is published under. "The Other Hand" is a good title because it speaks to the dichotomous nature of the novel, with its two narrators and two worlds, while it also references Sarah's injury. "Little Bee"

is a good title too, because the novel is really Little Bee's story, so it's a straightforward and an honest title. Also I like it because it sounds bright and approachable – and my aim with this novel was to write an accessible story about a serious subject. I like the fact that the novel has two titles. I like it when divergent choices are simultaneously right. While we're on the subject, I like my name. I think "cleave" might be unique in having two synonyms that are antonyms of each other. You see? I'm doomed...

**Is the novel based on a true story?**

No, but there's one true story in particular that made me determined to write the novel. In 2001 an Angolan man named Manuel Bravo fled to England and claimed asylum on the grounds that he and his family would be persecuted and killed if they were returned to Angola. He lived in a state of uncertainty for four years pending a decision on his application. Then, without warning, in September 2005 Manuel Bravo and his 13-year-old son were seized in a dawn raid and interned at an Immigration Removal Centre in southern England. They were told that they would be forcibly deported to Angola the next morning. That night, Manuel Bravo took his own life by hanging himself in a stairwell. His son was awoken in his cell and told the news. What had happened was that Manuel Bravo, aware of a rule under which unaccompanied minors cannot be deported from the UK, had taken his own life in order to save the life of his son. Among his last words to his child were: "Be brave. Work hard. Do well at school."

**Did you have a personal reason to write the novel?**

Yes, there was a chance encounter that really shook me up. Around fifteen years ago I was working as a casual labourer over the university summer vacation, and for three days I worked in the canteen of Campsfield House in Oxfordshire. It's a detention centre for asylum seekers – a prison, if you like,

full of people who haven't committed a crime. I'd been living within ten miles of the place for three years and didn't even know it existed. The conditions in there were very distressing. I got talking with asylum seekers who'd been through hell and were likely to be sent back to hell. Some of them were beautiful characters and it was deeply upsetting to see how we were treating them. When we imprison the innocent we make them ill, and when we deport them it's often a death sentence. I knew I had to write about it, because it's such a dirty secret. And I knew I had to show the unexpected humour of these refugees wherever I could, and to make the book an enjoyable and compelling read - because otherwise people's eyes would glaze over.

**Was it your intention to change people's minds about asylum seekers?**

Readers are smart and I'm not in the business of lecturing them. I see my job as providing new information in an entertaining way. Readers will then use that information as the spirit moves them. I think the job is important because there's something you can do in fiction that you don't have the space to do in news media, which is to give back a measure of humanity to the subjects of an ongoing story. When I started to imagine the life of one asylum seeker in particular, rather than asylum seekers in general, the scales fell from my eyes in regard to any ideological position I might have held on the issue. It's all about exploring the mystery and the wonder of an individual human life. Life is precious, whatever its country of origin.

**What could Little Bee do if she was allowed to stay as a permanent citizen?**

I think Little Bee could do anything she set her mind to, because by definition she is a survivor. When I was a teenager in the 1980s, we thought of asylum seekers as heroes. The hundreds who died while trying to cross the Berlin Wall, for example. Or the pilots, performers and scientists who defected from the Soviet Union. Or the heroes of previous generations - Sigmund Freud,

who fled to London to escape the Nazis, or Anne Frank, who could not flee far enough. Albert Einstein, Karl Marx, Joseph Conrad - all of them refugees - I could go on and on. When horror and darkness descend, asylum seekers are the ones who get away. They are typically above average in terms of intellectual gifts, far-sightedness, motivation and resilience. These are the people you want to have on your side. It will be a monument to our hubris if we allow ourselves to start thinking of them as a burden.

**Why did you choose to open the novel with the quote from *Life in the United Kingdom: A Journey to Citizenship*? What does the typo in this quote mean for you?**

The quote is "Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeing [sic] persecution and conflict." I took it from *Life in the United Kingdom*, which is the text book given to immigrants preparing for their citizenship test in the UK. It covers British history, government and etiquette. It offers the excellent advice "If you spill a stranger's drink by accident, it is good manners (and prudent) to offer to buy another." Less gloriously, though, its summary of British history is rather selective, and the work as a whole is riddled with inaccuracies and typographical errors. My belief is that if a refugee is prepared to walk away from a regime that has imprisoned and tortured her, flee to the UK, apply for asylum, and commit to memory the contents of the text book we make compulsory for her, then for our part we should at least be prepared to have that text book professionally copy-edited. The typo in that opening quotation is a nice example of a bureaucracy that is pretending to care, but not pretending very hard.

**Are refugee detention centres a necessary evil? Given the chance, what would you change about them?**

I hope all evil is unnecessary. Most of the UK immigration detention centres

are run for private profit by secretive organisations such as the multinational GEO Group. So, firstly, I'd take the profit motive out of detaining asylum seekers - because they are human beings, not a cash crop for investors. Second, I'd limit the time for which asylum seekers can be detained. As it stands they can be held in the detention system for a long time - sometimes for years - while the Home Office shuffles their paperwork. This destroys their mental health. Thirdly I'd stop the detention of refugee children. The UK Chief Inspector of Prisons wrote in a 2008 report: "The plight of detained children remained of great concern. While child welfare services had improved, an immigration removal centre can never be a suitable place for children and we were dismayed to find cases of disabled children being detained and some children spending large amounts of time incarcerated." That same report also stated: "Escort vehicles with caged compartments were inappropriately used to transport children." Surely I'm not the only one who wants to cry when they read that.

**Has your depiction of the immigration detention centre got you into any hot water in the UK?**

No, not at all. First, because the UK is still one of the best places in the world to practice the art of free speech. That's something truly great about Great Britain, and it's a civil right we defend through regular exercise. We don't have a constitution or a bill of rights to enshrine it, so we must practice it in our lives until it becomes an inbred instinct of a free people. Second, I think my depiction of a British immigration detention centre is accurate in the salient respects. It's based on research and it would be hard to take issue with it on factual grounds, so people haven't. That's not to say that everyone likes me for doing it, but frankly that's their problem and not mine. The British treatment of asylum seekers brings shame and ignominy on the nation. I didn't invent that treatment. I'm trying to focus attention on it.

**How did writing *Little Bee* differ from your experience with your previous works?**

I've only published one previous novel, which is called *Incendiary* (2005). *Incendiary* is about the emotional climate that brought us the "War on Terror". As a writer one is easily frightened when the West declares war on a noun, but at the time I felt it acutely because our first child had just been born and I hated the way our elected leaders were so clearly making this world a more dangerous place. When I get scared it tends to come out as dark comedy, or layered irony - anyway, *Incendiary* was how it came out. I wrote the draft in six weeks in early 2004, after the Madrid bombings and while the Abu Ghraib torture story was breaking. I went into a room in Paris with a coffee maker and a radio and I came out six weeks later with a beard and a manuscript, not really knowing how I'd done it.

The new novel [*Little Bee / The Other Hand*] came out of a sense of my own complicity in some of the evils of the world. I'd moved on from considering myself as an outraged - and blameless - observer, which I guess is where I was at with *Incendiary*. A year on, I realised that people like me are often part of the problem. I began to think about my life, and how it is relatively easy, and how it is therefore relatively easy to ignore the suffering of others. And since suffering is the rule rather than the exception in the world, it's not an easy moral question to duck as a writer. So I decided to address it directly, by imagining the most striking example of someone who is dispossessed - Little Bee - coming to ask for a help from someone - Sarah - who is a little bit more like me. I never plot my work in advance, so I was very interested to discover how the moral ambiguities would play out.

As a writing task, this novel was harder than *Incendiary*. I did a year of research. I interviewed asylum seekers and people involved in their cases, I researched the oil conflict in Nigeria, and I familiarised myself with Nigerian

English and Jamaican English. It was a lot of work before I even started writing. Then the book took nearly two years to write.

**The novel is at times funny, yet it deals with serious and tragic events. How do you arrive at the bittersweet tone?**

I'm able to do it because I have good readers. I can have my characters explore some fairly dark humour – for example, listing methods for a young Nigerian girl to kill herself at a garden party hosted by the Queen of England – while trusting my readers to understand that I am not making light of a serious theme. Rather, I am offering up a dark theme to the light, so that it may be examined. This is the only way I know to tell a serious story about current events without it becoming a lecture. And when I interviewed refugees and asylum seekers while researching this novel, I found that some of them use humour in this way too. These are people with very painful stories to tell. They have learned that in order to survive, they must get people in positions of power to listen to – and believe – their stories. And they have further learned that such people are more likely to listen if they make their stories entertaining, by showing the joy of their lives as well as the tragedy. They are the masters at telling their stories - because if they don't get that balance right, they die. That's motivation, right there. As far as storytelling goes, they're playing in the major leagues. Novelists are amateurs by comparison.

**Why does Little Bee talk about how she would have to explain things to “the girls back home”?**

The “girls back home” are the novel's Greek chorus – they are a foil in whose imagined reaction the cultural dissonance experienced by Little Bee can be made explicit. It's a good device because it feels more natural than having Little Bee go around talking straight to camera and saying “Wow, I'm freaked

out by this. And this. And this.” Much better for us to have Little Bee’s thoughts after she has understood the situation and can explain it to the “girls back home” from a position of superior knowledge. This allows us to appreciate the cultural gulf, whilst allowing the narrator to be knowing rather than tragic.

I look at human culture the same way science fiction does, but I look at it through the wrong end of the telescope. In sci-fi an ordinary protagonist discovers an extraordinary world, and the genre is exciting because of the emotional dissonance. But my thing is contemporary realism, so I’m always showing the ordinary world to what is effectively an extraterrestrial protagonist. It’s fun to do. Through this lens the most mundane events – Little Bee drinking a cup of tea in Sarah’s kitchen – acquire an immense significance and a certain beauty. Also, the things in our culture that are sad and ignoble – the fact, for example, that we can enjoy our freedom while imprisoning and deporting those who ask to share in it – appear in sharp focus through the eyes of an alien narrator. We have become accustomed to viewing our own actions in soft focus, but the alien narrator has not yet acquired this cultural immunity. She sees us as we can no longer see ourselves.

**How do you expect readers to react to Andrew’s actions on the Nigerian beach?**

I don’t have a preconception of how readers will react to that scene. My aim was to create a scene that was perfectly morally ambiguous, and in which the reader might quite justifiably side with either Andrew or Sarah. Andrew isn’t such a bad guy. What he fails to do on the beach is what most people would probably fail to do, myself included. Once Andrew realizes he’s made the wrong choice, it’s too late for him because the moment has passed and he is condemned to spend the rest of his days regretting that he failed life’s test. Sarah is lucky, really. She’s not inherently more moral than her husband, but

just at that one critical moment she happened to do the right thing. This means that she can look back on her actions on the beach without too much guilt or shame. She can move on with the rest of her life while Andrew must enter a terminal decline. It's ironic because Sarah's infidelity is the reason the couple find themselves on the beach in the first place. And yet her premeditated affair goes unpunished by life, while Andrew's momentary failure of courage dooms him forever. Life is savagely unfair. It ignores our deep-seated convictions and places a disproportionate emphasis on the decisions we make in split seconds.

### **Is Charlie/Batman based on your own children?**

Charlie is based on our oldest boy, who was four years old when I started the book. For six months he would only answer to "Batman". For a whole week I just listened to him and took dictation, which certainly beat going out to work for a living. Charlie's "goodies / baddies" worldview is endearing but of course it's naive and he's not in the book as an example of an ideal morality. Charlie is in the novel for two reasons. First because he's funny and loveable - he gives the novel an emotional centre; a reason for the adult protagonists to not simply walk away from the situation and disperse. Second, Charlie is a study in the early formation of identity. *Little Bee* is a novel about where our individuality lies - which layers of identity are us, and which are mere camouflage. So it's a deliberate choice to use the metaphor of a child who is engaging in his first experiments with identity - in Charlie's case by taking on the persona of a superhero.

### **How did using two voices allow you to tell the story more thoroughly? What were some difficulties you faced writing from a female perspective?**

After nearly two years with this project I realised that the strongest perspective would be a dual one. This is a story of two worlds: the developed

and the developing, and of the mutual incomprehension that sometimes dooms them to antagonism. So by taking one woman from each side of the divide, and investing each with a compulsion to understand the other, I was able to let the story unpack itself in the mind of the reader. This was a huge breakthrough for me. One shouldn't underestimate the role of the reader in this novel. I wanted to write a story that was never made fully explicit; which relied on the reader's interpretation of the characters' dialogue. Once you trust the reader with the story, the writing is really fun to do.

It's not without its technical challenges, of course. As a man it requires concentration to write from a female perspective, but I see that as an advantage. If I'm consciously writing someone so different from myself, then I'm protected from the trap of using my own voice to animate the character. It forces me to listen, to think, and to write more precisely. Using two narrators is difficult though. To differentiate their vocabulary, grammar and idioms is quite straightforward if you make an effort to understand and inhabit the characters, but the hard thing is how you handle the overlaps and the gaps in the characters' knowledge. When both narrators have witnessed an event, which one will you choose to recount it? Or will you let both of them tell it, and play with their different perspectives on what they've seen? When you use your narrators in series, you need to work to make it not feel like a TV show with bad links between segments. But when you use them in parallel, you need to take pains to avoid the text feeling repetitive.

Add into the mix the fact that the story is not told in linear time - the first half of the book is working backwards into history, while the second half works forwards into the future - and it quickly gets complicated. The trick is to make it read smoothly. It's scary how many drafts you go through till you achieve something that reads simply.

**Why is Sarah so much harder to like than Little Bee?**

I like Sarah, but I'm also glad when people don't. I like them for not liking her, because it probably means they have a strong moral sense and don't suffer fools gladly. But maybe they should give her a break. Sarah's not perfect, that's for sure. But actually when you look at what she does, it's very noble. She sacrifices herself, both mentally and physically, in order to save the life of a stranger. To my mind that excuses a lot of her shitty behavior – the adultery, the cynical day job, the aloofness. By contrast her husband, Andrew, is a moral paragon in his world, and yet when real life suddenly arrives to test him, he is found wanting. I also think Sarah inevitably suffers by proximity to Little Bee, who is much easier to like. If Sarah is more twisted, I think it's because her path through life has necessarily been more convoluted. Little Bee's life is extremely harrowing but it is also very simple – she is swimming very hard against the current, struggling to survive and not to be swept away. Sarah doesn't have the luxury of knowing in which direction she should swim. And so she takes some bad directions, makes some bad choices in her life, but ultimately her heart is good and she proves it.

### **Is the ending meant to be tragic or hopeful?**

I trust the reader to have their own idea of the characters and of their destiny. The problem with novels is that they are like the real-life relationships they describe: they are readily begun, and they never reach a definitive end where the whole thing achieves completion. So, being quite committed to realism, I trust the reader to see that. I have unusually great readers, I think. I get lots of email that makes me realize the level they're operating on, and that I can trust them more and more in my future work. I don't need to lay everything out or make everything obvious. I like it when readers bring their own inner life to the party.

### **What other writers do you like?**

I admire Cormac McCarthy most among the living writers. It's hardly an original position to take, but what can I say? What can anyone say about a man who has given us such an incredible body of work over several decades and who can then, in his seventies, write *The Road*, a novel which would tip the scales when weighed against all of his previous work?

I also like writers who can make me laugh while telling a compelling story. For this reason I love the work of John Steinbeck. It's his little novels I like more than the important ones. Whenever I'm feeling low I go back and read the scene from *Cannery Row* where Doc orders a beer milkshake.

There are also some writers whose work I like and who aren't as widely read as I think they should be. I think Howard Jacobson is among the greatest British writers, and his novel *Kalooki Nights* is one of the best of the last ten years. Alex Wheatle writes superb stories steeped in the street life and the vernacular of South London, and his new novel *The Dirty South* is excellent. And Ross Raisin is definitely one to watch in Britain. He's an excellent writer with strong principles, and his first book *God's Own Country* is great.

### **Why do you write novels anyway?**

I do it because I don't know much about the world and I want to find out more. I enjoy the work of educating myself through research, and then I enjoy the process of writing. Novels are incredibly intricate engines, and if you change one little piece here, it can throw the whole thing out of equilibrium way over there. So you spend half your time with tweezers and a jeweler's eyepiece, and the other half with safety goggles and a lump hammer. And eventually, usually around three in the morning, the thing just clicks into gear and runs. It's the most uplifting feeling. I get it about once every three years.