

# AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS CLEAVE

**Your new novel, *Little Bee*, is told by dual voices. What about this particular story called for that narrative choice?**

*Little Bee* is about two women who cross boundaries—emotional limits and international borders—that most people wouldn't cross. I use the dual perspective because I want to let the reader see the view from both sides of the borderlines and decide for themselves what they would do when they reach the book's big questions. I also think it's fun for readers to see which of the leads they empathize with: Sarah, who has most of what she wants except happiness, or Little Bee, who has lost everything except her sense of humor. By alternating the voices I hope that something quite unexpected happens—we realize the two women have a lot in common. I'm a believer that people are mostly good, and that the cultural differences between a Western woman and an African girl can be smaller than their ability to like each other as individuals.

**The two voices that tell this story both belong to women—how does a male writer write convincingly from a woman's point of view?**

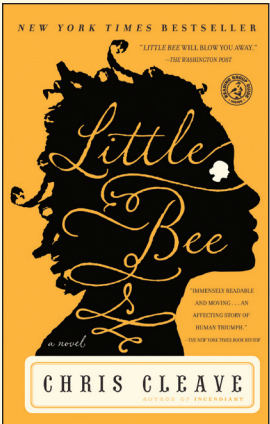
Actually I don't think there is one "woman's point of view." I'm guessing there are as many wholly distinct women's points of view as there are women. Sarah Palin and Tina Fey are both female but their points of view would look different on the page. So maybe gender is not the most fundamental component that constitutes a person's character—also important is whether or not a person would give a dollar to someone who asked for it, whether or not their heart races when they see a pair of dancing shoes in a shop window, whether they like Elvis Presley or Johnny Cash the best, and whether they're nice to children and animals. Also, people inhabit their genders very differently. Some are comfortable in their skin; others squirm in it. So as a writer I try to observe people carefully and to allow their uniqueness to become visible behind the mask of their gender.

**The title character, Little Bee, is a young African girl seeking political asylum in Britain. How did you, a white man, get inside the head of a Nigerian girl?**

Well it's not for me to judge whether I've done it successfully. I'm not even sure I understand how I'm supposed to feel as a white man, so god help me when I try to figure out how another group is supposed to feel. Again the bet I'm making is that there is not one universal female experience, one universal black experience, or one universal African experience. I try to find the individual. Little Bee knows fear in a way that I have never experienced it. She nourishes hope with a ferocity exceeding that with which I have ever had to nourish hope. She's been hungrier than I've ever been, and I dare say she's laughed harder too. These are the things I think about: what are the darkest and the brightest days in a person's life, the days that have made them unique. As a writer of characters this works better for me than to think, hey, she's from Nigeria, and she's black, so obviously she'd say this.

**What, if anything, from your own childhood experiences made its way into *Little Bee*?**

I had my early childhood in Cameroon, which adjoins Nigeria, and we even used to go on holiday to Nigeria, but I wouldn't say it taught me anything about Little Bee's life. It was good for the memory of the flora and fauna, the way waves break from the Atlantic, the way the red dust gets into your eyes and nose and ears, how hummingbirds hum and flowers knock you out with their perfume and monkeys scream in the night. But I was just a



kid and you don't pick up on the human nuances at that age. I suppose I have a memory of the region which is incredibly detailed in all but the important aspects. I didn't know the people. I didn't understand the delicacy of our position as a white English family in an African town. I didn't understand the poverty of the rural people, or their hopes, or their diseases, or their languages. Some of that has since come through gradual understanding, through talking with people and through research—for the rest I am still in ignorance.

**The violence that causes Sarah and Little Bee's lives to converge is part of what Sarah calls an "unofficial, three-way oil war." Is it based on true events?**

Absolutely. Nigeria is the world's eighth-largest petroleum exporting nation. It produces the same output as Kuwait—more than Iraq, more than Libya, more than Mexico. And there has been endless violence and corruption connected with the oil exploitation—many there see it as a curse on the nation. The three-way struggle is between the Nigerian federal government, the indigenous peoples who live in the Niger Delta region where the oil is, and the Western oil companies who exploit the oil concessions. Almost everyone has made a fortune except the villagers from whose land the oil is extracted. Many, many lives have been lost.

For some images of Nigeria's oil conflict, please see <http://tinyurl.com/6rf4de>

**Have you been to Nigeria and witnessed the horrors that are at the center of *Little Bee*?**

No I haven't, and no I wouldn't—not to the Niger Delta area where the Nigerian parts of the book are set. Westerners there are frequently kidnapped and ransomed. I wouldn't dare. Everything I know about that area is from journalists, much braver people than me.

**You've written that the first germ of this novel surfaced when you "went to a concentration camp by mistake." What happened?**

Yes, it was a chance encounter that really shook me up. Around fifteen years ago I was working as a casual laborer over the summer, and for three days I worked in the canteen of Campsfield House in Oxfordshire in the UK. It's a detention center for asylum seekers—a prison, if you like, full of people who haven't committed a crime but who are concentrated there for ease of processing. That's the textbook definition of a concentration camp, which is why I use the term. I don't for a moment mean to imply that the conditions in the UK detention centers compare to those of the Nazi concentration camps of the '30s and '40s. But the conditions in Campsfield House 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 my country was treating them. When we imprison the innocent we shame ourselves, 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 humor of these refugees wherever I could, and to make the book an enjoyable and compelling read—because otherwise people's eyes would glaze over.

For more about detention centers, please see <http://www.chrisleave.com/main/?p=33>

**Sarah's four-year-old son, Charlie, lives in a fantasy world in which he believes he is Batman. Did you include this in the novel merely for comic relief, or some deeper reason?**

Both, really. I love Charlie—he's very much based on my eldest son. When I wrote the book my son was four years old and he didn't care who knew it. He wore his bat suit day and night and would only answer to "Batman." He basically spent a lot of time fighting

crime, which was pretty funny. But the character of Charlie is in the book for a serious reason too. *Little Bee* is a novel about identity: national, racial, public and personal. The question is where our individuality lies, and whether there are layers of identity we need to give up in order to become ourselves. Therefore, the metaphor of a kid who is engaging in his first experiments with identity—in this case by assuming the persona of Batman—is a pointed one. Innocence is lost when identities are adopted, but I would suggest that innocence can be regained.

***Little Bee* is a hybrid of humor and horror—even as they recount the terrible things they have endured, both Sarah and Little Bee do so with wit, or at least an acknowledgement of the absurdity of life. Why did you choose this comic tone? Was it a hard balance to strike?**

Again it's not for me to judge whether I have the balance right. The humor comes naturally to me as a response to horror—I find some things so harrowing to think about that I try to suck the poison out by making myself laugh—either at the thing itself, or at the next thing that comes along. I think this is quite a common human response. And I found it in the refugees I interviewed while researching the novel. Some of them were always laughing about their own stories, and making me laugh too, and I realized what a deep and subtle form of strength they had. You haven't lost everything if you still have a sense of humor. You haven't lost your identity or your will to overcome. So of course it's healthy to laugh about one's own story—but is it healthy to laugh about someone else's? As a writer juxtaposing horror with humor for communicative effect, the question is always whether the result is engaging or obscene. I never know if I have the balance right. Some days it seems right to me. Some nights I wake up in a panic and think: what am I doing?

What are you trying to do as a writer? To entertain? Or to change attitudes?

I make this rule for myself: to seek out the biggest story in town, then to tell it in the most unexpected way, for the most adventurous readers. So my 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 would Little Bee do if she was allowed to stay as a 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 late '80s, 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. It goes even beyond our moral obligation to provide a safe haven. 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 asylum seekers as a burden.