On speaking across generations

Writer Stephanie Wambugu discusses the conflict of art-world representation, acting as a vessel of human emotion, and resisting trend forecasting.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2157 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Family, Process, Identity, Politics, Success.

You were born in 1998, but you write like you've been alive forever.

In a good way?

In a great way, like an old soul. You have so much wisdom in your writing… I was curious who your influences are and what you might attribute to this wise voice.

I read many coming-of-age novels while writing this book, but I'd say generally my big influences are Gary Indiana, Jean Rhys, and Toni Morrison. Similarly, I feel like their books could have been written at any time. Even though my book is historical fiction, I tried to strip it of temporal markers that would make it feel stuck in a particular period. Obviously the world and historical events intrude into the narrative, but I like books where that's tangential to the story and there's something timeless about the quality of the writing. I also really love Barbara Comyns for the same reason. Her fiction has a lot to do with class and downward mobility. There's a sense in her novels that artists take a vow of poverty, maybe unintentionally, and that's very different from how it's treated in *Lonely Crowds*, where art makes them upwardly mobile.

As far as sounding older than I am, the way my parents speak certainly seeps into my writing. There's something idiomatic and old-fashioned about the way they talk. I don't say that in a disparaging way; I think that the quality of the conversations I heard from adults during my childhood was very high. It just seemed so out of step with the way Americans speak, because [my parents] are not American. I always want to express in my writing the friction between generations. Listening to older people speak has been a huge inspiration for my writing.

Like your influences, your novel explores class, especially within the context of New York's art world. Given that the character Maria's upbringing was even harder than Ruth's, why do you think Maria is better at assimilating to that social class?

Maria's very chameleonic and has less reservations about moving from one world into another. I don't think she feels as beholden to her past as Ruth does. She's a bit more ruthless, coincidentally, than Ruth because she needs it more. Her life has been so precarious. In the book Maria is always characterized as being more beautiful and more capable, but all that information is delivered to us through Ruth's subjectivity. It's never really clear that Maria is any more beautiful or talented or actually charismatic than Ruth is; it's what Ruth projects onto her. I wonder now if it's Ruth's admiration for her that makes Maria feel entitled to outsized praise and attention, because she's always gotten it from this one person.

***Lonely Crowds* reminded me a lot of Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*, stories told from the perspective of the friend who's more meek or less bold, and seeing the other friend on this sort of pedestal.**

Thank you.

Both Maria and Ruth rely on romantic partners as their patrons later on. Is this out of necessity, or is this just something you've noticed in the art world?

In a tongue in cheek way, people always give artists the advice to marry someone wealthy. Not that I'm necessarily taking advice from Bret Easton Ellis, but he had a recent Louisiana Channel interview where he was asked, "What advice would you give young writers?" And he laughed and said, "Marry someone rich."

Ruth and Maria are definitely thinking about marriage and relationships in this strategic way. It's pragmatic to date someone who has generational wealth and Maria is very aware of this. Whereas Ruth sees herself as more moralistic and as someone coupling up for love or coupling up in spite of her own desires. It actually ends up being an advantageous relationship for her. I was thinking a lot about the evolving value we attach to marriage and that maybe now it's the first time where people are marrying primarily for love. These practical questions of, "Is this marriage viable in terms of how much money we have?" are crass to talk about, but that is what marriage has been for so long.

It's interesting to me that there's something going unspoken, this arithmetic people are doing in their minds when they enter into a relationship. Because I think everyone is doing it implicitly, even though that's maybe not the reason you stay with someone or fail to stay with someone. I think Ruth and Maria are making practical choices about the lives they want to live. And, at their core, they're both equally ambitious and materialistic. Maria is just unapologetic about expressing it; she's willing to say, "I want nice clothes, I want a nice apartment. I feel entitled to certain things." Whereas Ruth just conveniently does the same thing but is unwilling to talk about it for a host of reasons. I relate more to Ruth in this way.

I noticed that, whenever Ruth was longing to return to her apartment with her nice bedspread and set-up. I was like, "Oh girl, you want it, too."

Yeah, of course. I think that's true of many artists.

You said that your novel is historical fiction but it doesn't really have time markers. I was thinking does it take place in the '90s or early aughts?

It begins in the mid-'80s, when the girls first go to the Catholic school they receive scholarships to attend. By the end, I would say it's unclear, and purposefully so, because I wanted it to feel like, after certain events in the book, time stops mattering, in a way. Or you see that the characters' lives are so cemented, since everything that's consequential has taken place in their childhood and adolescence. But the novel ends during the early aughts.

Did you have to do much research into that timeframe or did you just imagine a world without internet?

It was a relief when I finally decided this was not going to be set in contemporary time, because I didn't want to have any social media in my book. I really didn't want to write about Instagram, about Twitter. I think that this desire to write something that's hopefully timeless was one of the motivations for setting it in this period.

There were interesting parallels between that period in the art world and what happened just after the death of George Floyd, in that there was a boom in the market for Black artists. Initially I wanted to write about that: the tension of obviously wanting to make money from your art, and making representational art, and accepting—maybe begrudgingly—this task of doing auto-ethnography and making work that's seen as being about your group. Art about oneself is often mistaken for art about one's group.

In 1993, there was a Whitney Biennial that was very controversial, as it was one of the first biennials where white male artists were not foregrounded. And you can imagine the criticism was very concerned with how

“overrepresented” non-white artists were in the show. I thought about that being a meaningful moment in terms of the professional possibilities that were available to young, non-white artists such as Ruth and Maria, and how it seemed artists at that time were contending with similar questions and very real grievances [around] violence being done to members of your group. Though it’s typically the most educated and the wealthiest members of an ethnic group who become pundits or spokespeople—to be the faces of grievances that are actually not happening to them, but which are felt indirectly.

Simply put, George Floyd dies and then you sell a painting for more than you would otherwise. And obviously it’s not one-to-one. I don’t think people were cynically cashing in. Still, I wanted to capture some of what was happening when I got out of college in art and in culture without having to write about being 22 and about the internet.

My thesis advisor in undergrad told me not to do any research when writing a novel, the idea being that you can fact check it later. That gave me a lot of permission to speculate and then fill in the blanks.

Were you at all worried about it selling because it is an historical novel? I mean, I know it’s not *that* historical, but was that a concern that you had regarding the market?

No, because I had no expectations that it would sell.

Really?

It’s not that I think it’s a bad book, but you don’t know what you don’t know. It was my first time doing all of this. I mean, I imagined it would eventually sell to someone. But at the time that I was writing it, I was just writing it as a student and as someone who wanted to write, and I didn’t think about those things at all until they were happening. I don’t think that’s something you should care about because you can’t anticipate what will be marketable in two years or three years or five years, or however long it takes to write a book. Trend forecasting is so detrimental because you have to like what you’re writing. If it fails, it’s still yours.

Your author bio and novel share some parallels: a Rhode Island upbringing, Kenyan ancestry, Bard for undergrad, current residence in New York. In what ways do you draw inspiration from your own lived experiences, and when do you decide to completely fictionalize?

I usually like to do one Kenyan-American stand-in. It’s interesting to do a self-insert that’s deceptive and that’s not me, although it signals something about where I’m from and my background. I think the conflation between narrator and author is interesting. In most of my fiction the characters are not me at all. But I’m interested in the culture I come from. It is more religious, much more collectivist. A school like Bard is the exact opposite. There was a huge emphasis on self-discovery, self-inquiry, what kind of person you want to be, the real possibility of being an artist if you wanted to be one. And so I thought, “I could invent a place like this.” But why invent it if I know what it’s like and I can reconstruct it in fiction?

Aside from money, what are the rewards of your creative practice and what do you get out of this work?

Aside from money. I love the way you start with “aside from money.” I think it would be being part of a lineage of writers, or doing something that you find aspirational. It’s a wonderful thing to encounter a book that maybe went through a long period of obscurity, or a book written by an author who died penniless and the manuscript was posthumously found. It seems like a gift to be able to speak to people across generations and talk to people when you’re dead.

I know that the tone of *Lonely Crowds* is fairly somber. I mean, obviously there are moments of levity. But I laugh so much when I write. I find it incredibly funny. I find writing dialogue very funny. It reminds me of this anecdote I heard about Kafka, where he was reading *The Trial* to a friend and he was laughing to the point of tears reading it. Even if something ends up being fairly heavy or grim or severe, there’s something so pleasurable about writing that I can’t help but laugh and feel happy that what I spend most of my days doing is

something that I did when I was a kid: to sit down and think about language and invent.

For a time I was doing a lot of readings, and I really liked when people would laugh and when people would come up to me and tell me, “Something like that happened to me, too,” even though the stories are not biographical at all. I loved being a container, a vessel for that feeling where people are able to have these unboundaried interactions. I wrote a story once where this woman goes to a funeral and she has this very strange threesome and this really sad, come-to-alter moment. Someone approached me after I read and said, “Oh my god, I had a very similar experience.” And I was like, “Well, I’ve never had this experience, but it doesn’t matter. That’s wonderful. I’m glad you could tell me that.”

Stephanie Wambugu recommends:

East Village Acupuncture

Dr. Singha’s Mustard Bath

Buying a bottle of wine at Discovery Wines and bringing it down the street to V-Nam Cafe, which is a perfect BYOB Vietnamese restaurant

My Dinner with André

Donny Hathaway’s cover of “Yesterday” by The Beatles

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