

# Arts and Africa

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## ANNC AND SIG TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we discuss terrorism, fiction and fact with a South African writer.

## SIG TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In the early seventies small groups of urban terrorists caused considerable concern by the killings, woundings and bank robberies in West Germany, and they still are. In "Hitler's Children", a book recently published in London, Jilian Becker, who has already written three novels - "The Keep", "The Union" and "The Virgins", looks at the lives and motivations of the Baader-Meinhof gang, the best known of the terrorists. Born in South Africa, Jilian now lives in London and I asked her why she was so interested in this theme.

JILIAN BECKER

That's a little hard to say. I've been interested in a certain type of character for quite a long time and my first two novels, both of which were set in South Africa, concerned a type of young man, who was very extraordinary and whom, I think, had all the characteristics of a possible terrorist. All he needed was to be used by others in that sort of way and he was that kind of material. So to become interested in terrorism itself was, I suppose, a chain of thought in my own mind.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now the novel of yours you mention, is, of course, "The Keep"? what made you feel like writing about terrorism as you say?

JILIAN BECKER

Well, "The Keep" itself isn't about terrorism. It's about a very extraordinary adolescent boy, who is totally indifferent to the feelings of other people. He will do anything if he feels it is a challenge to him, particularly a physical challenge to him. For instance, he will save somebody's life, not because he cares about the person, but because to dive into the sea among the rocks and pull him out is something that he feels challenges him in a way that he wants to respond to. He will also do absolutely terrible things. This type of psychology, I found very fascinating. Why I find it fascinating, or ever found it fascinating I can't say. I don't think I'm like that myself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You don't think it sprung out of your experiences in South Africa?

JILIAN BECKER

It might well have done. I think there's a great frustration that one can feel in a country where people think as so many South Africans do think and I suppose I felt that this boy in a way stood for an Africa that was not understood, an Africa that was intensely physical, that struck one with the intensity of its sensuousness, because that's the sort of person he is, and is perhaps without the kind of conscience that the Europeans claim to have. But he is a white man and he doesn't have it, and I suppose this kind of paradox interested me.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this book "Hitler's Children" is about this gang and the reaction is partly against Hitler's Nazi Germany?

JILIAN BECKER

Yes, a certain amount of backlash.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And there is a resemblance, more than a passing resemblance between Hitler's Germany and the present regime in South Africa. Do you see any parallels between the two situations?

JILIAN BECKER

Well, I would agree that there are certain similarities between the South African regime now and the German regime under the Nazis, because both are Herrenfolk ideologies. Whether in time there will be the same kind of backlash from the whites in South Africa, that I couldn't possibly predict. I think there are too many other factors that are different between the two countries. But I would

certainly say that there is somewhere there a parallel to look at, but I don't think that the urban guerrillas, who've been making a few attempts lately - one or two that we know of to create terror in the cities in South Africa - can really be likened very closely to the people I've been writing about. The people I've been writing about are middle class, well educated young people, who have no cause whatsoever. One simply can't discover a cause. They seem to be people who are really in search of a cause and just don't have one. I think a distinction must be made between this type of gang, the kind I've been writing about, and other sorts of - you can call them terrorists. I think many of them might prefer to call themselves "Freedom Fighters". People, for instance, who have a nationalist cause (whether or not I or you are in sympathy with all those causes or with their methods is another thing). But when we speak of the I.R.A., the P.F.L.P., the E.T.A., or on the other hand, I mean looking at, I think, quite a different situation, the Southern African one, we might not feel that they are terrorists, though sometimes they might use what I would call terrorist methods, but I certainly wouldn't have quite the same view of them as I have had of these European gangs.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you raised certain topics, certain themes in both "Hitler's Children" and your other novels. I can spot two of these. First of all the idea of political martyrdom. You have that in your book "The Union".

JILIAN BECKER

Yes, that is quite true.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And then you also have the theme of the effect of the puritanical society on the individual. Why do these two things fascinate you so much?

JILIAN BECKER

I don't think the idea of martyrdom particularly fascinates me. It seems to be involved in this kind of psychology in this kind of story. I deal with it fairly briefly in my new book, though there is a character in "The Union" who chooses a martyrdom for moral reasons. I don't think Meinhof chose them for moral reasons. I think she chose them because of inner-emotional urges, which is in fact the reason why, I think she went in for terrorism. I don't think there was any external reason. But as for the other, I think what is dangerous about puritanism, is that it sets standards that are way beyond human nature, and if someone is brought up to believe that they must be perfect, that he or she has to attain a

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degree of perfection that is quite beyond her capabilities or his capabilities - I'll say her for the moment, because there are two people in my book both women who are of this kind - She is inclined to feel that she is forever failing, and she will try to prove her moral rectitude by claiming that she is acting for ever higher ideals. The sense of failure is in itself something that people can't live with easily. They begin to accuse others, "I am so deeply bothered by these moral questions, you seem not to be. How dare you!" I think also that when one speaks of a fanatical pacifist, as many of these people were, and a fanatical terrorist, as so many of them later became - I think the streak of fanaticism is particularly there in the women - what one must stress is not pacifist to terrorist but the fanatical. One must look at that adjective rather than at the noun. Because the fanatical personality will fasten on to anything that comes its way and so little came their way for them to embrace as a cause for fanaticism. So they wanted to vent this fanaticism one way or the other. While the anti-bomb pacifist vogue was very much on in Europe in the late 50's and early 60's, they were part of that, but when later on there was a movement towards putting bombs about the place, these people started doing it. When many of the students then gave up, because they got university reforms, these were people who could not get back to normal life, and I think that this has a great deal to do with at least the development of some of them from pacifism and puritanism into terrorism.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTLY

Now why, may I ask, did you turn away from the novel, the fiction type of thing you've been writing to the non-fiction, the factual?

JILIAN BECKER

I wouldn't say I've entirely turned away from fiction. I'm working on fiction now and I think I'll always want to write fiction. But I was a mother of three children and I couldn't really go out of my house. I had to bring them up, so I used to write in an attic at the top of my house late at night and that's when I wrote novels. But once my children were grown up and they left home, I had this great gift of time and freedom and I wanted to look at the wonderful world about me, the fascinating, interesting and terrible world about me, and find out about it. So that's when I got myself a commission to do a fact book and went off in my own car to Germany. I met some of the nicest people I've ever known on that trip, but I also met some people who were really frightening, they were frightening because I could see in their aggression, in their sense of wanting to protect themselves from what I think they deeply feared might be the truth, a kind of psychology which I think is a very very frightening one. Once I got back to England, I got letters from some of these people, which can only be described as poison-pen letters. Because I did no more than go to them and say "I want to know the truth: This is your opportunity to tell me your point of view and I promise to deal with it faithfully. I will not distort what you tell me. But you tell me what you think I should know". Confronted with it like that, many of them

realised that what they had to say might not stand up to the kind of cool, objective examination which an outsider might give it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now these shady characters you talk about, these aggressive ones who wrote poison-pen letters to you, were they actually members of the gang, or were they sort of 'godfathers'?

JILIAN BECKER

They were friends and relations. I did speak to some ex-members of the gang. None of them were very anxious to speak to me and they've asked me not to give their names and I haven't in my acknowledgement. I've just said that I am grateful for all those who gave information. I think some of them very much fear reprisals from the gangs.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Let's talk about this book of yours "The Virgins". Tell us something about it?

JILIAN BECKER

Well, "The Virgins" has been banned in South Africa. I think it's been banned because it concerns sex across the colour-bar. This might not be so, it might be just because it concerns sex. I mean South Africa is a puritan country, since we were talking about this a little while ago. Of course, South Africa is a very puritan country. I suppose that this belief that banning something is going to keep those thoughts away from people's minds is deep in the authorities there. It seems to me a very surprising thought but there we are. The authorities in South Africa and I disagree over a great many things! But "The Virgins" was the novel of mine which most explicitly commented on race relations in South Africa. I suppose that's also something against it from the South African point of view. It's a very light, little novel, but it is sad as well as being quite funny. There is, I think, great sadness in it, because one of the stories it contains is of extreme injustice by a white family to a black employee. The central characters are two young girls, rather philistine young adolescents, who are nevertheless quite, well, very disturbed by the country they live in and they are growing up in it and wonder whether they can ever get away from it. I mean their question is, and of course, it's a question in my own mind, if one's grown up in such a country and one leaves it and perhaps one never goes back, is one then saying, well, I have cast off all responsibility? I think this is something that must worry all exiled, white South Africans very much indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So what may I ask then, are you going to turn your hand to next? Now you have written novels. You have written this non-fiction. You have found both interesting and I am sure that one compliments the other and probably enriches your experience? What do you hope to do next.

JILIAN BECKER

Well, at the moment I am finishing up a book of very long, short stories. I think it will be better to call them "novellas", short novels rather than long-short stories. And that little collection should be out in a year or so. But I very much want to write a novel using the knowledge that I acquired while I was researching this book on terrorism. I think that I could write a different novel now which involves what I might call the "terrorist psychology", which would probably be set in Europe now rather than Africa. But, of course, the fiction medium allows one to explore in a way that a fact book does not. In a fact book, you must not use your imagination too much. You must be true to what you discover. In fiction, you can use your intuition, for instance. I think this is so fascinating to a writer to be able to imagine, to say to himself, "what if" rather than "this was so", that I don't think anyone who has ever written fiction could really leave it entirely for the world of fact.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Our thanks to Jilian Becker. We look forward to whatever she writes next, fact or fiction.

SIG TUNE "LIMPOPO"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And so we come to the end of this week's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye. Join me again next week for another "Arts and Africa".