

# Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards\*

**Karen Long:**

I'm Karen Long. You are listening to *The Asterisk\**, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today, we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with Namwali Serpell — critic, short story writer, professor and novelist. She won an Anisfield Wolf Book Award in 2020 for her magnificent novel, “The Old Drift.” Welcome, Professor Serpell.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Thank you.

**Karen Long:**

Because this is a work of fiction that is capacious and welcomes us into so many worlds and genres, we thought we would begin with the words themselves. If you don't mind reading us three paragraphs from the mosquito chorus at the front of the book, we'd be grateful for that. This chorus, I've read, is something you came up with pretty late in the composition of “The Old Drift,” something that actually came to you in a dream, is that right?

**Namwali Serpell:**

Not quite a dream, more like a daydream. I was on a plane thinking about the technology of the drone and the micro drone. At some point in my thinking process, I realized that the insect that I wanted my micro drones to imitate was mosquitoes. This drew together several strands of the book as it already existed.

**Namwali Serpell:**

In a lot of ways, when I'm writing, it doesn't feel like I come up with things, and more that I stumble across things that are already there. The mosquitoes made perfect sense and were really fun when I actually started to ventriloquize them.

**Karen Long:**

They make such profound sense. The Greek chorus is so ancient, and the drone is so modern. I think you told *The New Yorker* that you subscribe to Nabokov's idea of memory and dream being active in literature.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Yes. A lot of the ideas that I have for fiction happen in the course of dreams or daydreams, which is, I think, the unconscious brain's art-making activity. There's nothing less self-conscious than a dream when it comes to creating a movie for your mind, so to speak. I often try to take down exactly what I felt and try to reenact it in my prose for my audience.

**Karen Long:**

Wonderful. Well, let's hear from the mosquitoes.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I'll be reading this in what I call my "Zenglish" accent, which is my Zambian English accent which I grew up speaking. Many of you will know the concept of codeswitching, which is when you speak with the accent of your hometown or your home state. This is the accent in which the novel is narrated in my head:

**Namwali Serpell:**

Miles south of Livingstone's final abode, above the Victoria Falls that he renamed for his queen, just before the river takes its furious plunge lie the stillest waters of the Zambezi and the stilled bodies of those who dared settle there. Ah, ye olde drifte. Over the years, it went from passage to place and eventually gave way to a grave. This is where we live, on the tip of the tongue of the air, full of secrets, black fever, marsh fever, tertian ague, and more than eager to squeal them.

**Namwali Serpell:**

And who are we? Thin troubadours, the bare ruinous choir, a chorus of gossipy mites. Uncanny the singing that comes from certain husks. Neither gods nor ghosts nor spirits nor sprites, we're the effect of an elementary principal. With enough time, a swarm will evolve a conscience. Thus, we've woven a worldly, wily web, contrived a hive mind if you will. Spindled bodies strung in a net of spacetime, interested, humming along.

**Namwali Serpell:**

We've been needling you for centuries untold. Or perhaps we should say centuries told. You certainly love your stories. Your earliest tales were of animals, of course, beastly fables carved into cave walls. Well, it's time to turn the fables, we say, time for us to tell you what we know. A swarm is but a loose net of knots. We hang in elastic severalty. Our song is the same. The notes we sing, like a plaintive erhu, form a weird and coordinate harmony.

**Karen Long:**

Brava.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Thank you.

**Karen Long:**

It makes me think of the poet Rita Dove's observation that the words you find are poetry. The way you described water is among the best she's ever read. I have a simple question: What makes a good sentence?

**Namwali Serpell:**

People talk about good sentences a lot in my literary sphere. People often rave about, "But the *sentences*." I'm often quite confused, to be honest. I think part of it is because in my other world, which is a literary critic, as a professor of English, we don't talk about sentences as good or bad. We parse them. We figure out the grammar, the diction, the particular choices that a person is making, the meter, the rhythm, the relation to the paragraph, to the whole, to the stanza. But we don't evaluate them as

good or bad, per se.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I think in general; my tendency is to think about sentences from a neutral perspective in terms of what the sentence can do. What can it create? What can it enact? What kind of experience does it give the reader if you're thinking about rhythm or if you're thinking about language?

**Namwali Serpell:**

Much of what I just read to you actually is stolen from other writers. Uncanny the singing that comes from certain husks, bare ruinous choir, these are allusions. To a certain extent the content is not mine, but the way that I'm incorporating it into a sentence is the part that I consider a kind of artistry.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Rarely am I thinking of trying to make it good or bad. I'm trying to think about, "Well, do I want this to jar? Do I want it to be mellifluous? Do I want it to surprise? Do I want it to flow?" So, a lot of it is about how I want the sentence to function less like a tool and more like a color in a palette when you're painting.

**Karen Long:**

That's so interesting. You're conjuring color. And with the mosquitoes, the language seems to needle us a bit like the observations.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I did want it to be rhythmically erratic the way that mosquitoes are in the air but to be rhythmic, not the way that normal prose sounds. There's a kind of poetic feel to the mosquito sections, but it's not consistent because mosquitoes, when they fly in the air, they don't move in the dance of the bumblebee. They kind of zing around. Sometimes, they move in loops and sometimes they come towards you in what seems like a needling, whining, irritating, hysterical screech. But sometimes, they waft from place to place. I wanted to give that sense of it being somewhat erratic, but somewhat rhythmic. I also, as you say, I did want them to be a little bit annoying that way real mosquitoes are.

**Karen Long:**

That makes me think about the freight that we lay on the titles of fiction. I have a librarian friend who adores your book. I said, "Is there any other title?" And he kind of wound me down and said, "Well, of course there could be another title." But your mother didn't like it, is that right?

**Namwali Serpell:**

Yeah, no, she said, "Well, it sounds old." I said, "Well, it has the word old in it." I'm actually quite bad at titles. I think titles, for me, pose a challenge because I'm thinking like a writer. I'm often thinking, "Well, what can the title evoke? What can it do? How much can it contain? What kind of rhythm does it have?" When really, the primary function of a title is to be informative. You really have no idea what a book called "The Old Drift" is going to be about...

**Karen Long:**

No.

**Namwali Serpell:**

... until.. the entire thing. In some ways, I'd say it's an overly artistic and therefore nonfunctional title. But it came to me through a friend. We went to visit Zambia together and we went on safari,

which is often what we do when we bring our American friends home with us. We don't generally go on safari ourselves as Zambian citizens. But when we bring our friends from abroad, they want to see the animals and so we go and see the animals.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Halfway through, the Land Rover pulled into a little grove. They hopped out and they gave us tea and biscuits and they said, "This is the old drift," but gave us no other information. It was a cemetery. It was these fallen-down gravestones that marked the graves of a group of European settlers who had tried to create basically a small town on the banks of the Zambezi, but then had all died of essentially malaria. They were too close to the river.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I thought, "What a strange monument to European colonialism and the missionary zeal to come and settle in Africa in the 19th century." My friend said, "This is what you should call your novel," which she hadn't read yet but that she knew about Zambian history. She's an editor. She's a wonderful and very smart editor and it just sort of made sense. And it started to make more and more sense as I was thinking about how time moves, about how the mistakes that our fathers and grandfathers and grandmothers make affect our lives, the idea of an error deriving from the Latin word for "to swerve" or "to sway" or "to drift" from the straight line that we normally think we're going to live our lives. It all just started to come together and make sense for the kind of story that I wanted to tell.

**Karen Long:**

I love that. Let's speak a minute or two about that mistake. I went back and reread the six sentences... That's all you took to put it at the forewaters, at the headwaters of your book... when Percy M. Clark, the historical figure, makes a fever-induced, alcohol-induced error and snatches bald an Italian hotelier, and sets in motion a mistake, an injury that will wind its way throughout your book. The first time I read it, I wrote *Gatsbyesque* alongside that paragraph, not knowing what it was, but that sense of the carelessness of the people who have power.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Yes. I think when we think about imperialism and colonialism, we often picture the Queen. We picture the Queen of England and we picture this sense of Christianity, commerce, civilization and these great grand forces coming into Africa. We understand it to have been a form of violence, but what is very clear to me when you read the historical accounts by the colonialists, by the settlers that came, is how haphazard and how arbitrary many of their actions actually were.

**Namwali Serpell:**

One of my favorite examples of this is that if you look at a map of Zambia, we have these kind of riverine lines in our borders. We're a landlocked country with seven other countries around us. But in the northwest corner, it's literally a corner. It's two straight lines. It turns out, this is because the imperial nations couldn't decide where the line should go. I think it's the Portuguese and the English. And so, they asked the Italian king at the time to decide for them how to draw this borderline. He just took a pencil and drew two straight lines, cutting through the landscape, cutting through... In the case of my mother, cutting through her village in the northeast of the country. The border went right through the village.

**Namwali Serpell:**

The idea that the hand of the empire looks straight but is in fact completely arbitrary and sort of

willfully, in some ways, accidental struck me as perhaps the most violent part of the colonial experience. The refusal to account for other people, to account for the land and the kind of belief that even if you were not educated, even if you knew nothing about the people around you, even if you thought they were your inferiors, somehow you still have the right to this land is, to me, the epitome of violence. That said, the line that went right through my mother's village, the joke was that the chief sent his sister over to the other side. She became the chieftainess and my mother's culture then became matriarchal. So there's a sense that we made lemonade out of lemons.

**Namwali Serpell:**

One thing that the novel's really trying to access is how productive and creative we can be even as it comes out of the arbitrary violence of colonialism. Bringing together multiple tribes, for example, in Zambia into what our first president called One Zambia, One Nation, you could see it as a compensation, as a petty reward for colonialism. But in fact, it was an incredible act of creation and survival that came directly out of the error that was the violence of colonialism.

**Karen Long:**

What that made me think as I was looking again at "The Old Drift" is of a work of nonfiction by the Israeli Ari Shavit called "My Promised Land." He begins that book with his Victorian era forebearers from London arriving in Palestine and looking out and seeing the Zionist future. His question, which animates the entire book, is how did they look out on a land with 250,000 people and see it as unoccupied? I thought that question had an interesting resonance with your beginning because it's hard to begin with Percy M. Clark and his racism, his casual racism, and keep going.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Yes. There was always a sense for me that this could stop readers. I had evidence that it has stopped some readers, but I wanted the reader to feel what I had felt when I read his memoir, "Autobiography of an Old Drifter," which I picked up after deciding this would be my title and this would be the place, I began my novel.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I decided to do some research and there was this memoir by this man, Percy M. Clark. As I was reading it, I thought, "Well, what a funny and jolly character really of his time, a kind of 19th century whippersnapper of a person who wanted to make his fortunes a little bit like a cowboy trying to head out west and establish...to settle the land."

**Namwali Serpell:**

And then reading the first 40 or so pages, I came across his first use of the N-word, which was surprising to me, in some sense, because it's a word I really associate with American racism. The English have their own diction for the inferiority of Black people. But he was using it freely along with the others, with the K word and with the calling Black people savages and so on and so forth. I felt so shocked and also so betrayed.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Zambia has always been, in my experience, an incredibly inclusive country. My father is a white British man who became a Zambian citizen and has spent most of his life there. Growing up in this mixed-race, cosmopolitan country where, when the Zambian flag went up and the British flag went down in 1964 October 24, anyone who was in the country, no matter where they were from, was automatically granted citizenship. Imagine that. In '64, that kind of sense of inclusiveness was radical.

**Namwali Serpell:**

To have this British man from the 19th century who I really... It's not that I thought of him as a forefather per se, but in a sense he is because I have British heritage. To see just, as you say, the casualness of his racism, the absolute assumption... When you were citing that quotation about Palestine, it made me think of how in his memoir, Percy talks about being so alone, so lonely. He had like 40 people with him helping hunt, but he doesn't think of them as company, doesn't think of them as people. That sort of paucity of imagination that the racist mind has seemed to me to be really important as a context so that people understood exactly what Zambian peoples, or the people who lived in that part of the world...Because it wasn't Zambia at the time. It was Northern Rhodesia, named after another British colonialist, Cecil Rhodes...what they were up against and how much they had to fight in order to forge a life, in order to create out of that space of violence.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I think people forget. I had a couple of reviews say that my depiction of Percy was stereotypical and two dimensional, that he couldn't possibly been that racist at that time, not realizing that this was a real person and that I was quoting him from his own memoir. I think we do a really good job of having amnesia. I just felt like it was really important to start the novel, to give that context, so you understood everything that comes out of that.

**Karen Long:**

And now, we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk\* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. We now return to the conversation.

**Karen Long:**

And to your point, your co-winner, Charles King, with "Gods of the Upper Air" discussed at length the casual racism of the elites in science, but he corrected me that you don't need to go back 100 years. It's there 10 years ago, and that part of the revolution in the sciences is to bring back to the center the work that was pushed aside because it didn't have white originators.

**Karen Long:**

I wanted to ask you, because I found it so interesting. This 18-year process that gifted us "The Old Drift" began in your last year as an undergraduate at Yale with a story you were writing about a woman who couldn't stop weeping. I thought about how apt that is for that time of life, perhaps, the struggle to gain emotional intelligence as a new young woman out in the world. Am I reaching?

**Namwali Serpell:**

No, no. I definitely created this character from a space of heartbreak myself. I think what struck me at the time in giving this kind of magical realist, very Marquez-influenced myth of a woman who cries all the time to my fellow undergraduates in a creative writing course was their immediate attribution to this woman of anything but heartbreak because she was African, because she was Zambian. Her weeping had to be some kind of witchcraft. It had to be some kind of magic. It had to be a symbol of Mother Africa weeping for her children.

**Namwali Serpell:**

All I want is for you to understand that she has a broken heart and that having a broken heart feels like you're never going to stop crying, so much so that your eyes will be encased in salt and your eyelashes will sew together. I tried to, again, replicate that reading experience, to a certain extent, in the novel itself by having other people misinterpret Matha Mwamba's weeping.

**Karen Long:**

Right.

**Namwali Serpell:**

But something that was very clear to me very early on... I was talking to my writing professor in my first year of graduate school, so I was 22 at the time and presented this revision of this story. She looked up and she said, "She's going to die, isn't she?" I said, "No, no, no, no." I said, "She's going to stop crying," and I knew exactly why she was going to stop crying. I knew that it had nothing to do with the return of her lover.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Interestingly, while I do think it was a very young person's depiction of what heartbreak feels like, I also had an inkling of the emotional wisdom to realize that romantic heartbreak was not the be all and end all of life and that in fact, there were other things that would affect this woman much more deeply as she grew older.

**Karen Long:**

This is why we don't marry the first person we love.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Well, not all of us do, but...people do.

**Karen Long:**

That's true. Thank you for telling us that. That's so evocative.

**Karen Long:**

One of the striking things about the reception to "The Old Drift" is that way we humans make meaning. I'm thinking about all of the readers who decided, "This must have a prize." There's our own estimable jury, of course, but also the Arthur C. Clark jury, the French jury that gave it a Belles-Lettres prize, the Windham-Campbell (sic) prize. It's so interesting to think about the lens the readers are wearing, and they're all landing on the story. What do you make of that?

**Namwali Serpell:**

I mean it's...

**Karen Long:**

There's not another book you can say that about, Professor Serpell.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I mean, obviously I'm deeply honored. What's really wonderful for me in receiving this great diversity of prizes is that it means that I managed to capture the eclecticism and diversity both of my own literary inclinations, but also of my country.

**Namwali Serpell:**

It was always a multi-genre book, even from its earliest days with this magical realist story that I presented as an undergrad in the year 2000. I knew that the daughter of this weeping woman would be a sex worker, and that she was going to be sort of hyper-realist in her desire for money and her willingness to sacrifice her body in order to make sure that she never succumbs to the fate of her

mother. And I knew that her son would be interested in science and would be interested in flying things, and so there was always a sense that I had a magical realist grandmother, a realist mother and a science-fictional son already built into one family.

**Namwali Serpell:**

And again, my readers balked at this. They kept saying, "Well, will the son also develop wings since he's interested in flying things?" I said, "No, he will build drones because he's in a different genre." And then as time went on, more and more writers, it seemed to me, were experimenting in the same sort of explicit way with genre.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Genre has always been messy. Frankenstein isn't just a science fiction novel. It's also a *künstlerroman*. It's also a story of philosophy. But this idea that you would have chapter-by-chapter different genres, Jennifer Egan's "A Visit from the Goon Squad" is like that.

**Karen Long:**

Yes.

**Namwali Serpell:**

"Cloud Atlas" is like that. And to a certain extent, Junot Diaz's "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" is like that. I thought, "Oh, these other people are doing what I'm doing," so it gave me this great confidence. I was very, very glad that when I pitched the novel and sold it in 2015, my editors didn't shy from that. They didn't flinch from it. They didn't respond the way that my early readers had, which was to think, "You can't possibly..."

**Karen Long:**

Live together.

**Namwali Serpell:**

And have different characters in different genres in the same world. They just thought, "Well, this is what she's doing, and this is how she's doing it." To have that recognized by awards, there's no award that exists right now for multi-genre books. But it means that the awards that do exist for books about race, books about science fiction, first books, books that are invested in a literary tradition could all find themselves in the kind of kaleidoscope that I was trying to create. And that's wonderful.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I can't express how honored I feel because it means that all of the different genres I was invested in received an equal amount of attention and effort for my part. I tried to do justice to the science fiction and the magical realism and the social realism and the historical fiction. To have each of those components honored in these various ways has been really moving to me. It feels like I'm being seen in the round.

**Karen Long:**

And it also reflects what you have accomplished with the living together, the genres living together. I love what Dr. Gates said about your book exploring how individuals make a nation and nations make an individual, how they're held together or fall apart.

**Namwali Serpell:**



Again, I've been describing this as kind of a reflection of my interests and my mind. It's also very much a reflection of my nation. I think all too often, African countries, African literatures get thrown together and the differences between them are elided. What is African about my book versus what is African about my books isn't necessarily evident to western readers because they've not been given access to the specificity of different African cultural forms.

**Namwali Serpell:**

While you can obviously see the difference between an Italian book and a French book, you might not think there's much of a difference between a Zambian book and a Nigerian book. But there is. A huge difference. One of the things that I would be most proud of is having Zambian readers say to me, "This is a book for the world, but it's also very clearly a book for Zambians because there's all of these Easter eggs that are just for us. They're things that are so recognizable to us."

**Namwali Serpell:**

That the book feels Zambian to me is the best thing I could hope for it. I really wanted to capture the quiddity, the specificity and the eclecticism of my country, which is, again, has always been cosmopolitan, has always included people from many, many different cultures and places but has also included within its own space seven main tribes, over 70 different dialects, all these different cultural forms coming together in a way that I really did want to imitate with my use of genres.

**Karen Long:**

That is so delicious. I need to swing our conversation toward current events. I was trying to think of a way to ask you about them. One idea that surfaced from going back to "The Old Drift" is this idea where you bring us, which is revolution, political revolution, making the questions of power explicit. That is a preoccupation with a lot of fiction, with a lot of storytelling, throwing off the oppressor.

**Karen Long:**

As we watched last Wednesday on January 6 the people invade the Capitol of the United States, I wondered about their notions of insurrection and their notions of throwing off power. In a strange way, there was that story in that mob.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I mean, I think the word mob is the telling difference. I think the desire for people to come together as one, as a mass, as a group and demand rights and throw off the shackles of power, whether it's in the form of imperialism or capitalism or domination, that is a human impulse. We've seen a long history, since the French Revolution, of attempts to codify that in the form of declarations of independence and also to make it clear that the people have the power.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I think the difference lies in the method. I think the difference lies in the...How do I put this? The reach of the freedom being called for. A mob wants to overturn power for its own sake. A mob is essentially selfish. A mob is not interested in freedom for everyone. It's interested in freedom for itself. I think that is the major difference for me. So, while it might look like the throwing off of power as an echo of the kind of protest movement that I talk about in my novel, I think it has behind it a different motivation. I think the use of violence to harm other people in order to reach that goal sets it apart.

**Karen Long:**

When you said a difference in method, I was thinking, "And motive."

**Namwali Serpell:**

Yeah.

**Karen Long:**

The interior life might not be that different, like "I'm on the side of good" for someone in that mob, but the motive is not to include but to exclude.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Exactly. If you think about the revolutionary movements for universal suffrage, for the abolition of slavery, for the destruction of apartheid, these are movements that want to be... They are in the name of a radical inclusion, not a radical exclusion and not... The taking over of power is not the same thing as a revolution that would level power and give it to everybody.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I mean, this is the definition of a coup. A coup is "I'm taking power from another group of people" and it's essentially just the same thing. It's an eye for an eye kind of mentality, whereas I think the method and motive of true genuine political revolution is to do away with power altogether, is to actually give us, every single person, the equality and freedom that they deserve. Inclusion versus exclusion is the exact axis along which I would differentiate the motives of the kind of revolution in my book and the kind that we saw just last week.

**Karen Long:**

Thank you for that clarification. It helps me personally. I have to say that I did want to give you a chance to talk a little bit about your Brief But Spectacular three and a half minutes for public broadcasting because that has been a well stone of joy for me, in the sense of a well stone of perspective. I love, love, love what you did with your Twitter handle to gesture toward that. Do you mind telling our listeners what you said?

**Namwali Serpell:**

When I first moved to this country with my family in 1989, I was exposed to science fiction for the first time in a reading group for gifted readers. Having had a Zambian education that had my reading level above that of my American compatriots, I put in this gifted reading program when we read a book called The Tripod trilogy, which was about these giant three-legged machines that turned about to be controlled three-legged alien creatures, so two tripods, two sets of tripods. I learned that these were called aliens, that they came from a different planet. I was eight and a half or so, so this was all news to me.

**Namwali Serpell:**

And then we received in the mail what were called our resident alien cards, our green cards. And so, I thought, "Oh, we're aliens. Oh, what does that mean? How does that work?" I learned very early that this science fictional concept also weirdly applied politically to me and my family.

**Namwali Serpell:**

It became clear to me probably after we moved back to Zambia for a year in 1995 for my parents' work and for my mother's dissertation research that I was an alien in Zambia now too, that I had taken on enough American culture and I had assimilated enough that I now felt no longer at home even in my home country. It's only a few years after that that I began to realize that this was actually an advantage, that it wasn't the dire, lonely, exclusionary space that most people think of it as, a kind of homelessness or a nomadism that keeps you always on the edges or always marginalized, as we say. But rather, it was a way of taking perspective, having a different point of view on a culture that I

was both inside of and outside of.

**Namwali Serpell:**

This idea of alienation as a negative thing, I managed to...As I suppose in my novel I do with the concept of error, I managed to think of it actually as a creative space and a version of perspective taking that was incredibly useful for my art and also for my analysis of American literature as a college professor, for example. In that sense, I gave this brief but spectacular... I guess it's a little movie in which I try to present this thesis that we can think of difference and being outside of a culture, or being both within and outside of a culture, as actually a kind of advantage if seen from the right perspective.

**Namwali Serpell:**

I combined my name with the word "alien" to exemplify this in my Twitter handle, which is @namwalien, which is so handily a kind of... I think the highest compliment for an author is to have their name become an adjective like Kafkaesque. "Namwalien" kind of describes a way of looking at the world. Hopefully, one day that will be famous enough to have its own adjective.

**Karen Long:**

Well, in the meantime, thank you for inviting us into the embrace of the alien as something creative and gestational. "The Old Drift" was exhibit A.

**Namwali Serpell:**

Thank you so much. As I said before, I really feel seen. Receiving an award like this that is really about the innovative ways that we can start to think about race and ethnicity and diversity in the 21st century, I feel very honored to participate along with my co-winners in that everlasting struggle to understand the human race.

**Karen Long:**

The Asterisk\* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby with help from producers Tara Pringle Jefferson and Jae Williams of WOJU Radio. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prizes. Thank you for listening.