

## **The echo of my footprints**

Jamal Mahjoub

'Then, when the water level dropped they found him there, sprinkled with fish scales, half-buried in the fine silt that reeked of the breath of dead volcanoes upstream.'

*The Cartographer's Angel* (1991)

I began to read seriously when I was about thirteen. Before that I had read mostly children's books, but it was around then that I really felt the possibilities of fiction opening up before me. I was lucky enough to be brought up in a house where reading was a thing. I often spent the afternoon exploring the shelves of books my parents had amassed in the time before my birth. Already, with that simple realisation, came the sense that these objects were bearers of their own message. A way of peering back into another age, one I had never witnessed.

Those books offered a glimpse of the mystery of what my parents' life must have been like before I was born. Most of the books were in English and belonged to my mother. I imagined her life in London as a young woman, training to be an accountant, working, visiting bookshops, reading in cafés, carrying those books around with her, folding over the corners of the pages to mark her progress. I wondered about where she had bought them, the streets and places she had visited. In my imagination, her life melded with

the world I read about in those novels by writers like Alan Sillitoe, Edna O'Brien, and Iris Murdoch. A grey, gritty Britain that was alien to me. The graphic covers hinted at all the things I associated with adulthood – sex, alcohol, violence. That was the appeal of the books, after all. They were a gateway into the grown-up world that lay ahead.

In themselves, of course, those books also contained the promise of other, interior journeys, leading across time and space. To *Giovanni's Room* and *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, from *To the Lighthouse* to *The Lawless Roads*. Each book offered insights into places that were far from my childhood home in dusty, warm Khartoum – a place that, it was safe to bet, none of those authors ever gave more than a passing thought to, if they had even heard of it. Years later, when I was living in England and beginning to write seriously, I found myself again conscious of this gap – between myself and the world I was trying to write about. Suddenly I was on the other side, and my presence in this new place felt uncertain. To write about Sudan, it seemed to me, felt like a huge undertaking, as if I were describing the country from scratch, like a distant constellation, or an unknown quantity.

I recall those afternoons, when the grown-ups would vanish into their rooms, taking themselves off for their siesta, as being a rather special time. Like most adults, my parents would sleep through the hottest part of the day – from after a late lunch around two pm until around six when the sun began to set and evening was drawing in. For those few hours, time would stand still. No one had any business to take care of. No knock-kneed donkeys stuttered down the road. No cars grumbled along the deserted streets. It was as if the whole world had been cast under a spell that put everyone to sleep, except the children.

In those hours the world seemed to belong to us. I was often overcome by a stifling sense of ennui, as if time itself had stopped. Day crawled towards night, and nothing ever really happened. You had to find your own means of escape. One of them was reading, another was exploring the world outside the walls of our house. I would wander the neighbourhood with friends, seeing things and mixing with people who had nothing to do with our family, with the course of our normal, everyday life. Such experience held the attraction of the forbidden, much like those far off places buried in the pages of grown-up novels. The stories that waited for us in the street on those long, dead afternoons were a way of crossing a boundary, of escaping the mundane, safe world where our ordinary lives played themselves out. The weird older kid who'd blown off a finger while trying to make fireworks from a bullet. The two women from a brothel trying to tear each other's eyes out.

The days ticked by with clockwork regularity. Sunset and sunrise did not shift with the seasons as they do in the northern hemisphere. Close to the equator, day passed into night quickly and without fuss. The hours were ruled not by the hands of a clock, but by a much older tempo – the arc of the sun across the sky. In the morning, you had to take advantage of the brief span of cool air before the ground heated up. In the afternoon, only a madman, or an Englishman, as the song used to go, would be out. It was a time for seeking shelter, whether it was inside a house or underneath a neem tree.

When I began to write my first novel, I found myself trying to recreate that same timelessness, in a sense of place that lent itself to the eternal, to myth. Those were dark times and reality was mired in distant civil war and famine, a hopeless political impasse. To counter this, I felt drawn to creating

another dimension, a means of transcending time in order to encompass an idea of the country as more than the sum of its dismal facts.

I was only marginally bending the truth. The perception of time was not limited to the linear, clinical increments that we associate with a rationalist, Cartesian logic. Time had a way of stretching and bending around the hours of the day. My grandmother never consulted a watch. When she came to stay, she would ask us to tell her what the clock in the living room said. Her day was regulated by the five prayer times which marked the phases of the day: Sunrise, noon, Maghrib, Asr, Asha; the sound of the muezzin wailing in the distance divided her day and lent it purpose.

My mother, an Englishwoman far from home, found this difficult to adjust to and would mark the start of her day with the sound of the World Service. The theme tune, 'Lillibullero', filled the dry air with the grandiose strings and horns of a BBC orchestra in far off London. It echoed round the globe, bringing order and regulation to every corner of the empire in the days when Britannia still ruled the waves. On the old Grundig radio the notes would falter, rising and falling as the shortwave radio signal bounced unsteadily across the atmosphere. My mother found reassurance in this ritual. It was like taking a compass bearing each morning, reminding herself that the place she was born in still existed.

That was another age, before the advent of digital fluidity and the decline of magnetic bearings. The old navigators used a combination of direction and time to calculate their position. Now, we can barely drive across a city without a global satellite image to guide our every turn, often with no sense of what direction we are going in. When I think of those far off afternoons, it feels astounding how much time I had to squander. It's almost as if time itself has speeded up while the earth has grown less familiar. So, as we

count the milliseconds off on our phones, I take comfort in the memory of that period when I could lose myself for hours exploring unfamiliar spaces, with no sense that I was wasting precious time but rather gaining something of immeasurable value.

### **Jamal Mahjoub**

Jamal Mahjoub has published both literary fiction and non-fiction. He has won a number of awards including the Guardian African Short Story Prize, the NH Vargas Llosa Prize and the Étonnants Voyageur Prize in France. His work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Die Zeit* and *The New York Times*, among others. His most recent novel is *The Fugitives* (Canongate 2021). He also publishes crime fiction as Parker Bilal.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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