

Mia Couto says beauty is something we must look for Writer's new novel is about the never-ending search for identity

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Interview by: Jeff Heinrich
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He comes from Africa and works as a biology consultant for an environmental company. But what's brought Antonio Emilio Leite Couto worldwide fame is his writing. Under his shortened name, Mia Couto, the 57-year-old author has published 25 books of fiction and essays and poetry in Portuguese, his native tongue, and has been translated into 20 languages, four of which he's fluent in (English, French, Spanish and Italian).



He has had two novels made into feature films, and has won major literary prizes in his homeland, Mozambique, as well as South Africa, Portugal, Italy and Brazil, including the prestigious Latin Union prize in 2007, a first for an African writer.

His 2009 novel, *The Tuner of Silences*, translated by David Brookshaw, was published in Canada in February by Ontario literary press Biblioasis.

We caught up with Couto at his home office in Maputo, Mozambique's capital, where he lives with his wife and their 21-year-old daughter. He was preparing to leave for a book fair in Bogota, the Colombian capital, before coming to Montreal for Blue Metropolis.

It will be his first trip to Canada.

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(This interview has been edited and condensed.)

You're usually described as a writer of magical realism. You don't like the term, however. Why not?

Magical realism is a category invented by someone who is obviously not a writer, especially not one living in Africa. For an African, it's impossible to consider this stereotype of what reality is and what magic or the supernatural is. It's not just a literary question, it's cultural, a different way of divining these borderlines.

Q: You're a white African whose mother tongue is Portuguese. How does that make you different from the majority black Africans?

A: I'm like all Mozambicans: What we're searching for is a new national identity, a kind of hybridization of black and white. As a former (Portuguese) colony, we have a more relaxed attitude toward race, and in that way I'm lucky: We don't define ourselves simply by the colour of our skin.

You're trained as a biologist. How did science prepare you for a life of writing?

Nothing prepares you for that, but I must say, biology does give me another narrative. I love biology, because it tells a story, the most beautiful story of all, the story of how life begins and how we survive as creatures. There's no tension between what I do as a biologist and what I do as writer. In both, I'm looking for a familiarity with the language of life.

You published your first novel, *Sleepwalking Land*, over 20 years ago, in 1992. What have you learned about writing since?

Not much, but I do feel more mature now. I've learned how to choose, how to cut the edges and then tell a story. I no longer want to put everything in one book. That's the important lesson. And also, not to overwrite, not to have an excessive attitude toward the search of beauty.

Your characters are often trying to solve a mystery in their lives. Is this important to you?

It's true for all quests for beauty: It should be something that we discover. Beauty is not just there; it's something we must go looking for. It's undercover, and the voyage is the important thing, not just in writing, but wherever beauty is.

Your latest novel to be translated into English, *The Tuner of Silences*, addresses that. It's about a youth finding out where he comes from. Why that subject?

You see, the search of where we come from is the search for part of an identity that lies in the past, in our origins, and I think that's something that's never solved in our lifetime. It's the mystery of our ancestors: How many stories are contained in a family? How many secrets?

At the start of the book, you quote Hermann Hesse, who said the "most violent of human desires" is "the desire to forget." Which is harder for you: remembering or forgetting?

I'm very good at forgetting; it's in my nature. I used to think forgetting was an absence of activity, but now I realize it's actually as much an activity as remembering, because you have to choose what to forget; it's never innocent. It's also creative: If you keep on remembering everything about yourself, you're a kind of prisoner of an image of your identity; if you don't remember, you must look for references around you.

You've sold 25 million books worldwide and been translated into 20 languages. Are you still 'you' in a foreign language?

You said 25 million?

Yes, that's the figure your Canadian publicist is using.

I don't think it's that much. But anyway, to tell you the truth, no, when I write in Portuguese I want to recreate words I read and expressions I hear, and in most cases they are not translatable into other languages. For instance, Jerusalem, the Portuguese title of *The Tuner of Silences*, has no equivalent in other languages. It's a play on Jerusalem, the city. In Portuguese, 'Alem' means 'beyond,' and that is missing when you translate it.

You're coming to Montreal for the Blue Met festival. What do you get out of writers' conferences?

The most important thing is to meet new writers, new novelists. Sometimes it's the only way to find people close to you who have the same kinds of worries and intentions. It's not the conference itself that counts, but what happens on the margins.

Mia Couto sits down with CBC Radio host Eleanor Wachtel for an on-stage interview Friday at 8:30 p.m. in Salle Godin of Hôtel 10, 10 Sherbrooke St. W. On April 27 at 7 p.m., he'll be interviewed in Portuguese and French by Aquino Eloisa at Las Americas bookstore, 2075 St-Laurent Blvd. Tickets cost \$10. More info at bluemetropolis.org.