

In the Skin of the Other

Writing *The Lizard Cage*

BY KAREN CONNELLY

Before I get to *The Lizard Cage*, the novel I am working on, I want to discuss some of the history which brought me to writing it. That history is, of course, the recent history of Burma, and my own history as a person engaged in the life of the world.

Burma has been run by a military dictatorship since 1962. In 1988, spurred on by radical student leaders from the country's major universities, millions of Burmese people joined together in massive protests demanding a return to democratic process. The military responded by sending troops out. Five to ten thousand Burmese citizens, including many school children, were shot and bayoneted to death on their own streets, and thousands more, particularly students and political activists, were arrested, tortured, and imprisoned. In the aftermath of this cataclysm of violence, many students left their country to join ethnic rebels on the Thai and Chinese borders. When I lived on the Thai-Burmese border, these were the men and women I spent much of my time with.

Ethnic rebels on Burma's borders have been engaged in a civil war with successive Burmese governments for over 50 years. It is the longest civil war in the world. The military violence against many ethnic groups in Burma is appalling and goes almost completely unreported in the West. All told, there are about a million Burmese refugees, of various ethnicities, living illegally in Thailand.

Within the country, since 1988, most universities have been closed or have opened only sporadically, in order to keep the student population

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from uprising again. The student protests of 1996, which I watched and photographed, led to a complete closure of all universities in Burma: in terms of education, the country can be said to be going backwards.

Civil society is increasingly paralyzed by fear: fear of military intelligence agents overhearing conversations, fear of being watched, fear of phones being bugged, fear of losing one's already meagre earnings if one's politics are brought into question, fear of imprisonment and torture and death.

Though the military regime has opened the country up for tourism and for multi-national business, Burma remains more closed than ever for its own people.

The leader of the official opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi, who won a legal election in 1990, and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995, continues to live, effectively, under house arrest, and her supporters are harassed and imprisoned on a regular basis.

So, in a nutshell, that is Burma now, today.... Ironically, our incredible wealth of freedom makes it more, not less difficult, for us to imagine what it is really like for people who live and struggle in countries like Burma.

We take that freedom with us, in our heads, even when we travel. Particularly in countries which are ruled by fear, the history, the unspoken customs, the gritty daily details, the very *reality* of lived lives often elude even the keenest of travellers.... A country is, as much as anything, a state of mind. If we are to have a profound and truthful experience of place, the mind must be open, must be vulnerable, must be spacious enough to accommodate a violent invasion of the other.

I think any foreigner who is trying to get *in*—into the language, into the club, into the inside jokes, into the skin of another culture—sets him or herself up, willingly, for that kind of invasion, the often exciting but usually painful onslaught of the other.... Unlike many people who become foreigners, I did not leave my country because of economic duress or political upheaval. I left Canada when I was 17 because I was starved for what I vaguely termed, even then, "real life"; I left, too, because I was sick of real life, the real life of alcoholism, suicide, and drug abuse that is the abridged history of my family. Having these very good reasons to be away, I lived in other countries, by my wits, for much of the next 12 years. I would return to Canada periodically, but my goal was always to have a life elsewhere.

At the time I did not know it, but the greatest education I experienced

was that of being a foreigner with a real stake in the foreign land. I knew from the beginning that exile was one way of protecting myself from almost sure disaster. I also knew that physical distance was not all I needed. While growing up I had observed that disaster is a kind of genetic trait, but I was going to do my best to escape the fate that my siblings were experiencing.

My business in other countries was very serious, a matter, psychologically, of life and death. I was to become a new person, a new citizen. I wanted to remake myself, to do the impossible and leave my history far behind me.

I set out to become "the other" with quiet fervency. I was adopted everywhere, and fed often. Besides the good, sane families I found wherever I was, I invariably searched out people who were marginalized: Gypsies, drug addicts, artists, cantankerous peasants, freaks of various kinds. These were, after all, the sorts of people whose codes I dimly or sharply understood. I discovered, during this strange, shape-shifting evolution of empathy, that almost everyone was profoundly wounded, in need of care, lost, variously broken, and always hungry for love and connection. In other words, I discovered the terrible truth that every escape artist comes to, eventually: there is no escape. All of us have a gene for disaster.

I quote the psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Julia Kristeva, from the book, *Strangers to Ourselves*:

Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply—humanistically—a matter of our being able to accept the others but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. Rimbaud's *Je est un autre* ("I is an other") was not only the acknowledgement of the psychotic ghost that haunts poetry. The phrase foreshadowed the exile, the possi-

bility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country, thus heralding the art of living in a modern era, the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed.

"Those who have been flayed."
When I first read this phrase, just a

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couple of weeks ago, it reminded me of many people. Above all, it brought to mind Tey Za, the protagonist of my novel, a man who lives alone in a bare cell and whose food is brought to him, twice a day, by a very young boy who works in the prison. One of the stories of the novel is about how this wily, silent child and this quietly desperate young man change each other's lives irrevocably.

Both of them are flayed people: great violence has brought them to the shocking and brutal but completely normal circumstances of their lives in the prison. Tey Za is a fictional character, but he is also many real men and women, just as the boy, Zaw Gyi, is many of the different children I came to know in Burma and on the border.

I could not have even considered beginning *The Lizard Cage* if not for my long education of trying to be other, and, in all those foreign places, of *being* the other. My sensitivity had developed to the point of becoming

a kind of psychological illness, but that is ultimately desirable in a writer. Absorbing and living so much in a state of actual foreignness prepared me for the most galvanizing experiences of my life so far: events in Burma and on the Thai-Burmese border. Writing this novel has been a continuation and a deepening, an internalization, of those experiences.

Contacts in Bangkok had given me the numbers of many people in Burma's major centres: political activists, artists, writers, editors, musicians, doctors. Over a period of weeks, I met with these people several times, and met other people through them. I had never heard people speak so passionately about freedom and art and political oppression. Burma was different than the other countries I knew. Burma was ruled by a dictatorship.

If I had experienced wounding and became a witness to and a recorder of the wounding of others, if I had lived among those who were damaged by bad parents and bad people and bad luck, this was something beyond, something far worse. Burma was an entire country flayed by its symbolic parents, its rulers. This was dysfunction and disaster on a national level, and that is exactly how the people described it to me.

Actively suffering the denial of their most basic human rights, my new-found Burmese friends were keenly aware that I had come from a place of great openness and wealth.... We discussed many various painful and dangerous aspects of living in Burma under military rule. I learned much and I asked many kinds of questions. But the one and key question Burmese people asked me was, "Will you write about this?"

Artists prohibited to exhibit their paintings. Famous writers whose works never pass the Press Scrutiny Board. The outspoken father, brother, sister, mother who is taken away at night, and sentenced to seven, ten, 20 years in prison.... "Why don't you write a book about *that*?" "Will you write this story down?"

I was ignorant then, really—an innocent; I knew very little but, confronted with such intelligence and such calm yet desperate anger, the very least I could do, in my great freedom as a writer, was to reply Yes. I will write this down.

Of course I didn't really understand what I was getting myself into.

Writing this book has been profoundly painful, often harrowing. Artists are notoriously good at describing their suffering, so much so that in the West we think of them as the most authentic sufferers, which diverts attention away from others who are in far worse situations. So, fear not: I will not moan too long about my own difficulties, but rather point out that the pain of writing the book is integral to its realness.

Obviously, you cannot write a book about life in a Burmese prison and be happy: it simply does not work. For about two years, getting to know my characters and their histories, I wrote in tears every day, distraught and sickened by the process of internalization that would make Tey Za and his prison experiences authentic in writing. One must feel what one writes. I have known that since I began writing. But it is another thing entirely, a terrible, necessary act to enter the darkest places in the human world and to stay there for long periods of time, to commit to living there spiritually and mentally....

For over four years, I have lived—and live still—in an obsessively informed state of concern—interest—passion? about prisons in general, and one prison cell (Tey Za's) in particular. Prisons—whatever their level of security or brutality—are human places: that is the hardest thing to face. We build them. We fill them. We commit brutal and government-sanctioned crimes in them.

From my reading and my conversations on this continent, it is arguable that most of the political prisoners of North America are blacks, Hispanics, and Natives. In Burma, they are people like Tey Za, *openly*

declared by the ruling authorities to be dangerous. Ruling authorities everywhere are afraid of voices—not the ghostly voices of schizophrenia, but the voices of human beings who demand truth, change, and, above all, power. Prisons are places where human beings can be de-voiced en masse, much like battery upon bat-

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tery of laying hens are debeaked. My sweet-natured, devoutly Buddhist, song-writing protagonist Tey Za lives in such a place. His sentence is 20 years long, in solitary confinements. As the novel commences, he has served eight years.

As I said before, the book is based on the stories of many men, many women. When I tried to visit Burma for the third time, I was denied a visa. So I went to the Thai-Burmese border, travelling from one border camp or border town to another, absorbing history in the most ancient way—through the ears.

Tey Za was born after nine months of conversations, interviews, meals, travels, cheroots, intense silences, and hundreds of glasses of tea among many of Burma's official dissidents who live in precarious circumstances on the Thai-Burmese border. Almost all of the details in the prison, from the lizards Tey Za kills and eats in Buddhist guilt to the elaborate ceremony he performs with cheroot

filters—they are made of precious newsprint—come from the stories of men and women who have lived in Burmese prisons and work-camps. Women on the border were not as accessible, mostly because they were women. Even in revolutionary groups, women do not have the same power of voice as men. Because I spent most of my time with men, the voices I began to hear and nurture as a writer were men's voices.

The clear idea for the novel formed during my time on the border: the stories people most wanted to tell, it seemed, were the stories of how they became political, and then how they ended up and survived in prison. And I realized that, metaphorically, the story of modern Burma is one of incarceration.

Tey Za has been molded out of the clay of other people's voices; he has been given their breath. And their blessing. Repeatedly, the men and women I became close to expressed appreciation that I was going to use the information they had entrusted to me to write a novel about Burma....

I tell the complex story of a young man's politicization and subsequent imprisonment. Then show the world and the psychology of a child labourer in the prison. Then link up the boy's world to Tey Za's, and then build a plot around a jealous criminal prisoner, a beastly cook in the prison kitchen, and a tormented prison official.

Who did I think I was?

What did I think I was doing?

Burmese dissidents and activists on three continents have been, from the very beginning, a source of indispensable support. Several of them have been reading drafts of the manuscript since I began writing it.

Once, a dissident I knew quite well introduced me to another man who had just been released from prison and escaped across the border. Though the man was worn out from his journey, he was very willing to talk. My friend sat us both down with tea and introduced me, "This is

Karen. She is a writer from Canada who is writing a book about a Burmese political prisoner." He spoke in a hushed, serious tone. "So tell her everything you know, because it is very important for us that her book becomes a big bestseller."

So that is where I am: produce a good book or reckon with the revolutionary forces on the Thai-Burmese border. Like my editor, they are beginning to wonder just where the book is, when it will be finished. And what can I say?

The Lizard Cage has become its own territory now: dark, sad, hopeful: hopeful because Tey Za, living in an isolation designed to physically and spiritually crush him, continues to believe in the rightness of human connection and human love. What can I say? The book is coming. It is coming slowly and with great labour out of the prison of my own mind and spirit.

A version of this article was presented at York University's Millennial Wisdom Symposium, sponsored by the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and the Royal Ontario Museum. The Symposium, which ran from October 4, 1999 to April 14, 2000, featured nine public events on the York University campus and at the Royal Ontario Museum. Lectures are available online at www.robarts.yorku.ca.

Karen Connelly's most recent book is a collection of poetry entitled, The Border that Surrounds Us, published this spring by McClelland and Stewart. She is working on a book of essays about the Thai-Burmese border as well as the novel discussed here. She won a Governor General's Award in 1994 for a non-fiction work about Thailand.

JOAN BOND

Dandelions

Our neighbourhood edict
flapped against the screen door:
*Dandelions are to be extirpated
from the property lawns of Spruce View Estates
by June 21.*

I watch you from the front window
you wearing a red cap
(price tag \$2.98 still stapled
bought in the Arctic)
holding a two-tongued tool
in your spring-soft palm.
You start wreckage
you dig deep
my love digs deeper.

But they are so pretty
so yellow. I can make
some dandelion wine
and we can eat the leaves.

Mosquitoes halo your cap
sweat glistens in dusk's blue shadow.
Cozy in my favourite chair
I glance up from knitting
your frown unfurrows
you show me a proud box
(stamped Krotochi's Fruit Stand
found at the dump)
full of limp wounded weeds:
321 Spruce View Estates Drive, excavation executed.

In the starwhite darkness we love
on plain snow fields. Your fingers,
toughened, press my unkempt heart.
I whisper to you
release my green.

Joan Bond's poetry appears earlier in this volume.