



Interview: Zimbabwean author Andrea Eames



By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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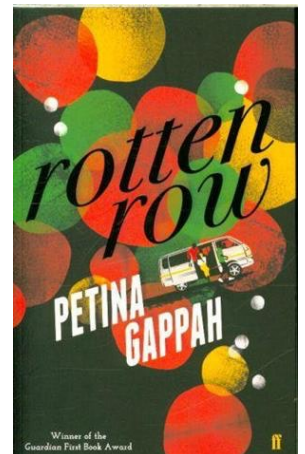
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The authoritarian regime of Robert Mugabe came to a dramatic end last week in Zimbabwe with the resignation of the country's 93-year-old founding father. The joy captured on television cameras that Zimbabweans expressed in the street was palpable even to those thousands of miles away.

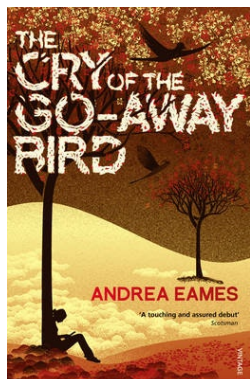
His recently dismissed Vice President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, was sworn in as president days later.

The man that South African Nobel Peace laureate and Archbishop Desmond Tutu described as "a cartoon figure of an archetypical African dictator" cast a long shadow on the lives of all Zimbabweans, as described by lawyer and author [Petina Gappah](#) in her essay for the BBC [here](#). He also remained a figure larger than life for the white population that stayed on in Zimbabwe through the country's transition from a colonial power built on racial hierarchy, to independence. Many were



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farmers who still owned the majority of arable land, even if they represented roughly a mere 5 to 8% of the population. When Mugabe's government began land reforms and ownership laws changed hands, many white Zimbabwean farmers were forced to give up their farms and leave the country.



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Author Andrea Eames' family one was of these; they left Zimbabwe in 2002. In *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird*, the first of her two novels, both set in Zimbabwe, Eames describes her character Elise coming of age on a farm with all the privileges her white skin affords her; her unflinching and frank prose in a child's voice brings the reader to the heart of the matter in a few short sentences: "The whites were special, somehow. They did the important jobs; had nicer clothes and bigger houses. You never saw a poor white person. I thought that we must have done something to earn all these nice things. It made sense."

And yet it is with Elise's nanny, Beauty, a Zimbabwean Shona, that she feels the most comfortable: "Her skin was as familiar to me as my own."

Elise says: "I was the whitest of whites, I knew, with freckles and pale eyes that blinked and burned in the sun, but I did not feel white."

Less than halfway through the book, as Elise becomes an adolescent, political troubles begin, including Mugabe's plan for land redistribution. Her mother is for it, and argues her point to her partner, who disagrees: "We did take it away from them...and we need to give it back if we're going to move forward as a nation."

Elise agrees with her mother: "'They were here first.' The word 'they' sat strangely in my mouth. I would rather have said 'we.' My whiteness felt like badly fitting clothes."

Eames emigrated to New Zealand with her family, and in an [interview](#) with a New Zealand magazine the regret she expresses at her departure is heartfelt:

"When I think about my friends, white and Shona [the majority group of black Zimbabweans], Indian and all the different nationalities there were in Zimbabwe, I feel that if we had stayed in Zimbabwe, gone to university there, grown up, got jobs, things would have changed. Because we were all in it together as young Zimbabweans, we'd all laugh at our parents—whether they were Shona or white—and their attitudes. I like to think if we had been left to our own devices and had been able

to stay then...but maybe that's a bit naïve. Perhaps there was just too much old blood.”

Eames now lives in Austin, Texas, and kindly answered the following questions for Bookwitty:

You spent the first sixteen years of your life in Zimbabwe and in your first novel, *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird*, you describe a girl coming of age during the years that Mugabe rose to power. What were your thoughts a few days ago when you heard that he was removed in a coup and then when he resigned?

I was thrilled. And surprised. I used to pray for a bloodless coup when I lived there, but I never thought seriously that Mugabe would step down without a civil war. I have always said that I will throw a party when Mugabe dies, but I think this outcome is worth a celebration as well. I hope that good things lie ahead for the country - I'm wary, but hopeful.

What was the image of Mugabe that you took away from Zimbabwe as a child, and how did your image of him evolve over the years, as he became more and more dictatorial?

As a child, I honestly didn't know much about him. He was just there, like the weather, and just as unpredictable. It was only as I got older and started listening in to the adult conversations that I got an inkling of the sort of man he was. He was the butt of many jokes, always, but never seemed truly frightening to me until the farm invasions began and I saw how dangerous his bombast and ridiculous posturing really could be. It seemed a lot less comical, then.

In the post-Mugabe era, do you think Zimbabwe might finally get a chance to craft its national identity?

It has to. Mugabe cast a long shadow, and people were afraid to speak out and be themselves, I think. There is so much vibrancy and innovation in Zimbabwe, and I hope that his resignation and the absence of that shadow allows it to come to the fore.

How can one overcome a history of brutal, racist colonialism and then internal strife?

We have to believe that it's possible to overcome our history, personally and country-wide, or we couldn't get out of bed in the mornings. I'm not an economist or a historian, and I'm certainly not an expert because I write books set in Zimbabwe, but it is a place I know by heart, and it's a place I believe in. I believe that the Zimbabwean people, without Mugabe's influence, are kind and generous-hearted and inclusive by nature, and I think they will be able to build a new and more inclusive society together.

I feel a little uncomfortable asserting myself as Zimbabwean when I feel like we were so unwelcome there, when we left rather than staying to see the hard times through, and when I carry a burden of guilt about previous generations, but that doesn't change the fact that I am Zimbabwean, right down to my bones.

What was so interesting in your book was the perspective of the character Elise, a young white girl, and how she describes feeling African in her bones—something we often overlook regarding whites who have grown up in Africa over several generations. Do you still feel African, and how do you live this in between-ness?

I do feel African, which confuses the Americans here immensely, because they don't seem to realize that there are white people in Africa! I've moved around the world a lot, and, really, I don't believe I belong anywhere. I'm not alone in this — I think a lot of the Zimbabwean diaspora feels the same way. I feel a little uncomfortable asserting myself as Zimbabwean when I feel like we were so unwelcome there, when we left rather than staying to see the hard times through, and when I carry a burden of guilt about previous generations, but that doesn't change the fact that I am Zimbabwean, right down to my bones.

Have you traveled back to Zimbabwe since you left? If so, what were your impressions? How did you feel?

I haven't. My family left under a cloud for various reasons, and I've been apprehensive about going back. That might be different now. I would like to go back, but it's an entirely different country now from the one I grew up in, I know.

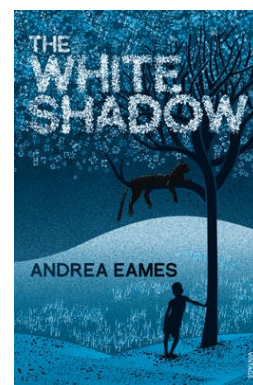
In *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird*, you describe Elise's nanny, Beauty, and her close relationship with her. Was this taken from your own experience? What was the inspiration for your next novel, *The White Shadow*, which recounts life in Rhodesia from the point of view of a Shona boy?

Yes, it was very much taken from my own experience, as much of the book was! I novelized the story so that I could borrow from other's accounts and leave out some of my personal family history, but much of *The Cry of the Go-Away Bird* is taken directly from my own experience. I had a nanny called Beauty who took care of me and my sister when I was little, and with whom we lost touch later. I think about her often. She was a second mother, really - my first mother, for a while.

The White Shadow began as a voice talking in my head, which I know sounds a little crazy! I sat down to write something entirely different, and I certainly never planned to write my second novel from a perspective outside of not only my gender, but also my race. Tinashe started speaking, however, and I started taking down dictation, and the first 10,000 words of the novel formed that way.

Your novels both take place in Zimbabwe. You have also published two books of poetry. Is Zimbabwe present in your poetry as well?

Not at all, as yet! I'm not sure why not. My poetry tends to be very intimate and confessional, concerned with my emotions and thoughts. I haven't been able to write any poetry pieces with a wider scope as yet.



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Could you recommend a few books for readers to better understand the situation and the history of Zimbabwe?

Mukiwa, and *When the Crocodile Eats the Sun*, by Peter Godwin

Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight, by Alexandra Fuller, *We Need New Names*, by Violet NoBulawayo and *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War*, by David Martin

Banner photo of a Shona farm

Tags

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