



A conversation with

RICHARD MASON

author of

WHO KILLED PIET BAROL?

Q: The legend at the heart of *Who Killed Piet Barol?*, about a monster living in a forest, is a story told to you by a 100-year-old Xhosa man. What did he tell you? Tell us how the book began.

A: There is a forest in South Africa that's believed to be a place of dark magic. As soon as I learned this, I knew I had to visit it. With two Xhosa friends, I asked permission of the village's chief to spend a night there. He granted it, uneasily, and sent his witchdoctor to cast spells of protection over us. As I went in, alone, she said: "This is a powerful place."

It is. A fraction of its former size, the ancient forest of Gwadana has been hacked down from its outer edges – crowding the creatures whose home it is into an ever-smaller area. And by small, I mean *tiny*. Nowhere near as large as Central Park.

I had recently experienced a family tragedy, and as I slipped through the tree line I felt like I left recorded time. I found a rock, and sat under a vine of purple flowers. A cobra slid past me, into the undergrowth. I listened to the rustling of the leaves. The presence of trees that had survived the calamities of hundreds of years reminded me of my place in the order of things.

I emerged profoundly changed. I wanted to know *why* people don't venture into this magical place. And after I met Mr. Mbiko, the 100-year-old Xhosa gentleman, he told me the story he knew. "There is a creature in the forest," he said, "with the face of a woman and the body of a snake. Her glance turns you to stone." Intrigued, I asked him how he knew, and the answer chilled me: "When I was a boy," he said, "a white man came, and he set up structures in the forest, and told us of the monster."

K N O P F Q & A

Q: Who was the White Man?

A: That answer is lost, but he was part of a centuries-old tradition of intrepid Europeans who came to Africa, took great personal risks, and set much mischief and suffering into motion. I suspected he had reasons of his own to keep the Xhosas out of Gwadana, and that these reasons were connected with the fact that the forest is now a fraction of its former size.

I wondered what kind of person could tell a story so convincingly that it endures 100 years later. And what it does to a person's soul to tell a lie of this magnitude.

I decided to write a book about a man who could do such a thing – who would have the talent, but also the will, to set this chain of events in motion. Piet Barol came into my head, and he's been with me ever since.

Q: The London *Times* has talked about “The complicated love-hate, race-stained relationship” between Piet Barol, the main character, and the Xhosa clansmen who lead him to Gwadana. Can you talk about the issues of race and class that are woven through the novel?

A: You can't write about South Africa, or indeed about America, without discussing questions of race and class. I wanted to dramatize a particularly consequence-laden moment in South Africa's history: the passage, in 1913, of the Natives Land Act, which abolished property rights for black people in 93% (!) of the country.

It troubles me that so many in South Africa, and around the world, have forgotten the Natives Land Act – but its legacy endures. I wanted to write a story set in this turbulent time, and to chart the complex relationships between Piet, a white man who perceives himself to be poor; Luvo, a black man with a superb education, who believes in democracy and wants to overturn the Act; and Ntsina, a Xhosa raised in the old ways, who believes himself to be rich – because he has everything he needs.

The relationship starts out transactional on all sides, but becomes intimately connected – for good and ill – as the three men journey through the fabled forest.

Q: How did growing up in Apartheid South Africa inform this book, and who you are?

A: Although my parents were dissidents, I had a typical white colonial childhood. I lived in a house with electricity. There was always food. I loved Katy, my black nanny, dearly, but I didn't know much about her life outside our home.

I was always conscious of the injustice that meant that I got to go to a great school, while Katy's children had to cope in the radically underfunded schools reserved for black people. It's partly why later, when my first novel, *The Drowning People*, unexpectedly became a bestseller, I set up a foundation to widen access to quality education. I named it after my sister, Kay Mason, who committed suicide when I was ten; and the Kay Mason Foundation has, so far, helped 266 extraordinary kids get the educations they deserve. Some have made it from the townships through med school or to firms like McKinsey.

K N O P F Q & A

As a little white boy, I spent my time reading Enid Blyton and thinking about British history. I was entirely separate from the cultures of my own country. Part of coming of age as a storyteller for me involved returning to South Africa, and going on a quest for what I had never known.

Q: Many of the characters in the novel are Xhosa. Were you anxious, as a white person, about creating black characters?

A: When Piet Barol first came to me, I knew that his journey would take him to an African village, but I couldn't create black characters. Having grown up under the Apartheid regime, I just didn't have the experience.

Fiction can convey profound truths, and I didn't want to sit in my study in London and "make up" a Xhosa village. I could have visited the Xhosa homelands and stayed with friends, but then I'd have been a guest. I couldn't have gone under the surface. You can only do that by living in a place, and involving yourself in what happens there.

Q: So what did you do?

A: I decided that by giving something of myself, I would somehow, as a byproduct, have whatever experience I needed to write this book. So I moved to the Eastern Cape and set up camp on a deforested hillside. I had long wanted to help out in that beautiful part of the world – where drought and HIV are widespread, and only 1% of children graduate high school with a decent education.

With two Xhosa friends, Onwaba Nkayi and Nonkazimlo Tom, without whom this book would never have been written, I helped found Project Lulutho, which means *Opportunity* in isiXhosa. The Community of Mthwaku put in 38 hectares of land, and I borrowed the money to build a campus for green business skills. A bunch of Zulus, Xhosas, white South Africans, French, German, and Americans joined me. Among them the chef from my favourite restaurant, who abandoned his Michelin-starred kitchen and cooked for us in an anthill oven.

What ensued was beautiful, and ugly; appalling and wonderful; hilarious and intensely sad, in approximately equal measure. I lived for a year under a tent at Lulutho, but it was only after five years that I was ready to write a Xhosa village with warmth but no sentimentality.

Q: Is Project Lulutho still going?

A: I'm glad to say that Lulutho continues to thrive, though I am no longer on the Board. As *Who Killed Piet Barol?* hits the shelves, the water facilities we installed are keeping thousands of people and their livestock alive through the worst drought in a generation.

Q: Did anyone help you imagine the world of *Who Killed Piet Barol?*

A: Many people did, but one person in particular stands out – a young Xhosa man named Cebisa Zono. I predict that he will be a star of South African literature.

K N O P F Q & A

Cebisa had volunteered to be an assistant chef at Project Lulutho. About six months after we set up camp, he told me that he had written his first novel at the age of 21. I'd done the same in English.

The bond of the storyteller united us across the differences in our life experience, and Cebisa helped me set my Xhosa characters in their cultural context.

We were aided by a remarkable book he found, abandoned, on the floor of his grandmother's shut. A book written decades before, containing some of the secrets of Xhosa mythology. Cebisa's cousin had been using its pages to roll joints. Needless to say, we rescued it!

Cebisa later told me that his ancestors had appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to join us. As a result, he got a scholarship to university and lived in my apartment in Cape Town for two years while he went to school and worked on his own novel.

Q: In all of your books, and especially in *History of a Pleasure Seeker* and now with Piet and Stacey in *Who Killed Piet Barol?*, there is a lot of sex. Some writers have difficulty writing sex scenes – how do you write about it so convincingly?

A: It's important to remember that sex is primarily a *psychological* experience – how people are feeling, as much as what they are doing. Sex is so integral to the human experience that the novelist can't ignore it.

I can write about sex from a man's point of view, but I also want to get in the heads of my female characters. I've found a lot of women are happy to speak candidly on that topic. One of the best "research" conversations I ever had took place on a plane, flying to Dallas. I was sitting between a woman and a man. She asked me what I did for a living, and then what I was writing about. I told her I was writing a scene in which a middle-aged woman and a twenty-something man had the best afternoon of their lives with one another. We began discussing certain, ahem, technical aspects – and got so engrossed that the man on my left got up and moved! Perhaps he had learned how he'd been failing his wife, all these years...

Q: Piet has featured in one of your previous books. Will there be more to his story? What is next for you?

A: I've been working on *Who Killed Piet Barol?* for the past ten years and can't imagine Piet being out of my life. Readers tell me how much they love him – even though he provokes complex feelings. He's a scoundrel, but he's very tender-hearted; a man who feels things deeply. He has unusual skills he can't quite control.

I'm currently working on a TV series about Piet, based on *History of a Pleasure Seeker* and *Who Killed Piet Barol?*, with BAFTA-winning director Philippa Lowthorpe. You haven't seen the last of him by any means!

K N O P F Q & A

Q: And your coming books?

A: I'm making an interconnected galaxy of novels, that stand alone and can be read in any order, but which fit together to tell a vast story. The first was *Natural Elements*. Then came *History of a Pleasure Seeker*, which recounts a year in Piet Barol's life when he is 24, learning the craft of getting his own way. *Who Killed Piet Barol?* is the third.

The next, which I'm writing now, concerns the experiences of Louisa Vermeulen-Sickerts, who is 19 years old in *History of a Pleasure Seeker* and the daughter of one of the world's richest hoteliers. We glimpse her in *Who Killed Piet Barol?* and in my new book I pick up the story of her life when she's in her fifties, during the Second World War, and the certainties of her youth have been obliterated. I'm exploring the madness and the courage of the secret agents who risked everything to fight behind enemy lines to bring down Fascism.

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