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# alumni life

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Alumna Irene Sabatini  
wins Orange Award for  
New Writers 2010

# A novel revolutionary



Irene Sabatini, who has a master's degree in child development from the IOE, has just won the Orange Award for New Writers 2010 for her first novel, *The Boy Next Door*. In this interview, Irene tells you a little bit about herself. She looks forward to seeing you at the annual alumni gathering on 14 July, where she will be our VIP guest (more on page 5).

**You did your first degree at the University of Zimbabwe. How did university life in Harare compare with university life in London?**

University life in Harare was an exhilarating, frustrating, fun and highly volatile experience. I was coming from the quiet city of Bulawayo to the buzzing metropolis. I had also had a rather sheltered upbringing: I went to a catholic school with very watchful nuns and my parents were strict about such things as going out. Harare was my first experience of freedom.

The usual university shenanigans went on: the socialising and the passionate taking on of new ideas. I met people from very different backgrounds to my own, who either sharpened my views or broadened them.

For example, from an American student, I was introduced to feminism which, according to my revolutionary brothers on campus, was a bourgeois luxury – first the workers had to be liberated, and then maybe women! She gave me a highly treasured volume of *The Second Sex* which makes an appearance in *The Boy Next Door*.

There was also the added drama of politics, revolutionary politics. This was in the late 1980s and there was much to get excited about: imperialism and corruption in government being the main targets. So I marched – I wore a beret! I felt the fear and pulse of running away from riot police, of being trapped in a tiny room in the student hostel as riot police unleashed tear gas, batons. But there was also the camaraderie of meeting with fellow students and coming up with new adjective-packed slogans.

University life in my Harare years was completely different from my experience at

the IOE. In London, I relished the calmness and the lack of distraction from my studies, possibly because I was much older and was a spent revolutionary force!

**Has your first degree in psychology helped you define characters in *The Boy Next Door*? Did your MA influence any of your writing?**

I think that all my life experiences feed into my writing one way or the other.

My psychology degree gave me theories about human behaviour which must be somehow there in the characters of *The Boy Next Door*. How do individuals react to certain situations? What is the stuff of character? What is the essence of racism? How do critical life events affect one character as opposed to another? And most essentially, what does it mean to love someone? One practical thing that my psychology degree in Harare did provide for *The Boy Next Door* was the cooperative groups. My thesis was on cooperatives and I spent some time in the countryside around Rusape interviewing these dedicated, hard-working groups – usually women – who were so heartbreakingly intent on making their soap, uniform or bread enterprises succeed. I met many wonderful characters and a couple of them make a highly imagined appearance in the book.

My MA in child development at the IOE surely gave me the insights to the boy, David. It must also have given me some of the vocabulary

to describe and explore the emotions of a traumatised child and to follow their development. I remember that one of my lecturers was from

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Brazil and had done some fascinating research on mathematics with street children there and I'm sure that her descriptions of those children, their intensity and desires, have stayed with me, churning away in the far reaches of my brain.

**Is the novel autobiographical? Would you say that the narrator, 15-year-old Lindiwe, is a part of you as a young girl – did you fall in love with a ‘bad boy’ at some earlier stage in your life?**

Lindiwe has bits and pieces of my childhood but she grows up to be her own woman. No, I did not fall in love with a ‘bad boy’ like Ian! Ian is utterly a creature of the imagination and I consider him a great gift. Obviously he must come from somewhere and perhaps he is an amalgamation of all the white boys in Zimbabwe I had glancing encounters with: at the church youth group when I was the only black member; at university; at the advertising agency I worked at while studying; at the employment agency I did a one-month stint in on my return to Zimbabwe after several years away; the farmer’s sons my sister described, who came into the offices of the Commercial Farmer’s Union where she worked. The intrigue that happens in the novel is all pure fiction!

**Can you reveal your writer’s secrets, e.g. before you started writing *The Boy Next Door*, did you have the full story outline, the historical context or details of all the characters to be featured?**

I have absolutely no idea where a story is going every time I sit down and write. I have no plans. That’s the great joy of it. Sometimes I’m left aghast at what’s happening to characters or where the story is suddenly heading and I have to take breaks to absorb it.

*The Boy Next Door* had a two-pronged genesis. One was a suggestion from an American editor I had met at a writers’ conference in Geneva that I write a memoir about growing up in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe. I really resisted this idea. I wanted to write fiction. Still, his idea must have stuck because several months later, when I received a phone call from Bulawayo that there had been a fire at my childhood neighbour’s house, the two elements fused together to become the story of *The Boy Next Door*. They are captured in the very first line: *Two days after I turned fourteen the son of our neighbour set his stepmother alight*. The two events, in real life, happened many, many years apart but, in the book, they fused into a single time. Such is the great pleasure of fiction.

**How would you describe the difference between the insight obtained into post-independence Zimbabwe through literature as opposed to journalism?**

I think that literature, when it’s good, as opposed to journalism, gives you the freedom to be the characters, to enter into their lives, their psyche and so their experiences become, in a way, yours. I’ve been reading lately novels based in Ethiopia, which cover the periods from the Italian occupation to the revolution. What these works of fiction have allowed me to do is to enter the pain and despair, the hope, to share in the struggles of certain characters that I have identified with (because of the artistry of the writers in making these individuals come alive). A news report informs me, but because it is factual – those people are there suffering – my identification with the individuals being reported on would be obscene because ‘I am sitting here well fed’ – so I keep myself at a distance. It is them, not me. I think that literature allows for the emotional possibility that ‘they’ could be ‘me’. The reader, I hope, can connect with Lindiwe in *The Boy Next Door* and live with her as she tries to shape a life for herself in post-independence Zimbabwe. The reader can move beyond the comforts of pity to something more personal and, I think, more profoundly human so that next time, when a news report comes, it is seen though different, more empathetic, eyes.

**How does it feel to be this year’s winner of the Orange Award for New Writers?**

It is wonderful (of course!) to be the winner of the Award. It means that the book will now get more exposure which hopefully means more readers! There is something utterly thrilling every time I get feedback from someone who has read the book: their views on the two main protagonists and in the story, how they have made it all their own. On a

personal level it gives me that added boost of self-confidence and belief as a writer.

**Your book has been published in several countries. Do you get involved in the translation process? For example, whose idea was it to translate the title to**

***Geteiltes Herz* (divided heart) in German?**

No I don’t really get that much involved in the translation process. I’ve just received the Dutch version of *The Boy Next Door* and it was quite a curious experience to open it and to see my words rendered in a language I couldn’t understand at all! And, by the way, I love the Dutch cover, which shows a grown up Lindiwe. The German publisher changed the title to *Divided Heart* because they felt that it would resonate with their potential readers. It is, for me, a big leap of trust. I have to believe that the publishers

believe in the book and want it to do well and that, most of all, they have understood the story and will maintain the integrity of it in its translation, title and cover.

**Would the novel lend itself well to being turned into a film?**

Many people have told me that *The Boy Next Door* would make a great movie. I’ve even had casting suggestions!

**Do you now have plans to write another novel? Would any of the characters present in *The Boy Next Door* appear in forthcoming novels?**

I’ve just finished a new novel which is a big departure from the world of *The Boy Next Door*. Lindiwe and Ian were such vivid characters to me that, even now, I can still ‘hear’ them - I do know exactly where their story begins again, if I ever decide to write it down!

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You can read more about Irene’s prize winning book at [www.orangeprize.co.uk](http://www.orangeprize.co.uk)

