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BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

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# THEFT

❧ *stories* ❧

N. S. KÖENINGS

Reading Group Guide



## A conversation with N. S. Köenings

*You spent part of your childhood in East Africa, the setting of your novel, The Blue Taxi. How did your experiences there inform your writing?*

I've spent a lot of my adult life in East Africa, too, and I do still go there. That area of the world is part of my contemporary experience—my actual, continued life. In the spring of 2008 I went to southern Tanzania for the first time, and I'm planning to go next to Mozambique. But Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, these countries and places in them are not at all weird or exotic to me. They're just places, like wherever a person has grown up or worked or lived is an ordinary place. I can't write, yet, about places I've never been or seen. And at the moment the fact is I've spent more of my life in East Africa than elsewhere, though at this point I've been in the United States for a rather long time, too. I'd love to go to Ireland, to Spain, Hungary, Japan. And I have a dream of spending time in Bangladesh and China. There's so much going on! So many people to meet and get to know.

*What writers do you most admire?*

I learn something from everybody. And I learn as much about how to tell a story from listening to music and watching TV as I do from reading literature. From television—HBO serials, especially, like *The Sopranos* or *Deadwood*, but also animated

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series like *South Park*—I learn what keeps me glued to my seat even though I have chores to do, what keeps me worrying about a character while I'm at work and can't tune in to see what they're going to do, or (in the case of *South Park* and *The Simpsons*) how to generate a total atmosphere, with color, shape, and line. How do you do that with the written word?

Music is also very, very important—I think sentences, paragraphs, chapters, ought to be like songs, with choruses and movement. Images that cycle back again and take you somewhere else. I listen to great storytelling musicians: Tom Waits, Randy Newman, Nick Cave, Harry Nilsson. Bob Dylan, of course. More recently Regina Spektor and Martha Wainwright, singers who know what to do with words and voice and really set a scene, take you somewhere with the sounds they make.

I do read when I can, but honestly I think too much literature can ruin a writer's mind. I heard that Neil Young never listens to other people's music. And that seems right to me. You can lose your voice by letting in too many others. I did hear Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o speak not long ago. He's wonderful and I'm looking forward to sitting down with his new book. I always reread Ruth Praver Jhabvala's work, and Janet Frame is a big influence. I read a lot of British mysteries, too, for their insights on politics, race, class, the dangers of domesticity. Maybe more than anyone, Jean Genet, that gorgeous thief, has shown me that shamelessness and daring bring an undeniable, terrible beauty. I'm working on that, very much.

*You often write about people in vastly different social contexts. To what degree do you think those contexts shape your characters?*

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Well, we all struggle with societal expectations, no matter who we are or where we grow up. Everybody does, whether they conform to those expectations or not. I've spent a lot of time in my life (wasted, more like) trying to belong in one setting or another, trying to "make sense" to other people. Trying to fit in is what most people are doing most of the time—and for some people it works. It hasn't for me. And more recently I've started to think that social expectations actually prevent us from discovering who we might be if we were freer to explore. History and social norms! These give rise to prejudice and discrimination, too. You know, "women are like this," "men are like that," "people from this group are like this or like that." Those ideas have had murderous, horrible effects in human history, have caused a lot of wars. As far as I can see, they're poisonous, limiting. And even for people with a lot of imagination and courage it's hard to step away from those categories completely.

A lot of the characters in my stories don't conform to social norms. Petra and Thérèse have a sexual relationship. Thérèse has a child and gives it up, continues to seek pleasure. Osman is transgendered. Zulfa doesn't want to be a wife again. Habib likes to dress as a woman. Other characters really suffer because they do conform, or want to at all costs. Celeste wants the world "just so." Gustave thinks he can collect and label experiences and people. Shama's mother-in-law can't hear anything but the conclusions she's already jumped to. Ezra's uncle is the only one who comes through transformed, because he's forced to rely on someone he doesn't like.

I think a lot of people are committed to playing the so-

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cial role they've been assigned. They're unable to take intellectual or personal risks because they feel they'll disappear if they try to learn something new. Learning changes you, turns you inside out. If more people challenged themselves to be who they'd like to be, or said "Who am I?" instead of accepting what they're told, they might indeed disappear completely! But they might become something much more particular and interesting. And smarter and kinder and less interested in upholding the categories that separate people from each other. And happier, I think.

*You've now published a novel, The Blue Taxi, as well as this collection. How is the process of writing stories for you different from writing a novel?*

Stories are far more painful to write, and, I think, more constricting than novels are. A novel lets you wander in one world for a long time, lets you discover it in all its corners and peculiarities. Stories require much more decisive strokes than that. You have to say: this world is like so. But if I look out my window I can already see that the street will look different if I'm actually on it, or just cross it or move down the road a little. Or you look at a person in profile, and they look nothing like they do from the other side or frontally. For me, nothing is stable, and I'm trying to see everything, all at the same time. In real life, everything shimmers and dissolves. In a novel you can show that instability can be part of complicated happenings that unfold spaciously. In a story it's much harder to do.

I also don't believe that any story belongs wholly to one

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person, or that one situation is entirely separate from another. A lot of writers and artists recognize this today—think of the recent movie *Babel*. Artists in the West are at last coming to see global history in ways that artists in other places have already been doing for centuries, and it's showing in the contents of all kinds of artwork. We're struggling to depict interconnection, the relations between apparently disparate worlds, which it turns out aren't disparate at all. We're all in this together, or we're nowhere. Some people can gesture to these urgent realities in a single, short, short story. Salman Rushdie, for a trite and undeniable example. I can't do it in under thirty pages, as these stories show. I'm not sure I want to try.

*What theme do you see as tying these stories together? Is there a particular significance to the title?*

Theft is a big deal to me. People steal from each other all the time—not so much money or possessions, but dignity, safety, love. Fear steals hope from us.

The stories in this collection move from North to South on our globe—a lot's been stolen from the South, what people call “the developing world.” Emmanuel Wallerstein was right—the North is what it is because the South has been exploited.

But governments everywhere steal from their people, too, not just by destroying homes, as happens to Ezra and his neighbors, but through weird tax regimes that reward certain kinds of conformist behavior, by enforcing stiff ideas about nationalism, stealing people's ability to know each other as human beings first.

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Death and illness steal from us—Osman’s legs are swelling up and he’s in pain; the outside world, the upstairs, has been taken from him. Shama’s sister has disappeared for unknown reasons; Shama’s lost the possibility of knowing her. Masoud loses Zulfa—her desire for independence does rob him (and her?) of a certain kind of happiness. For Zulfa, freedom of mobility is something she has to take utterly without permission, and it’s going to cost her and her family a lot. It costs Ayeesha, too, escaping.

But all this shouldn’t be surprising. Theft is a fundamental part of human doings. It’s also, to be honest, fundamental to the art of fiction writing. Writers are thieves of a terrible kind—watching the world around them and taking other people’s pain and secret hopes and making something else with these, something that gives them, and maybe readers, pleasure. We’re stuck with that. Until death steals us all away.

*As you mentioned, the stories move in setting from Europe to Africa. Did you structure the book this way deliberately? What do you find interesting about the interaction of people from different continents?*

One thing that’s been true in my life is that the whole world is always present, no matter where you are. People in East Africa imagine the United States and Europe in all kinds of ways, just as people in Europe have their own fantasies about “natives” and “dark continents.” In Zanzibar, people talk about Cat Stevens and Malcolm X and Monica Lewinsky with ease. Spirits, like Sheikh Abdul Aziz (whom I interviewed, by the way, he’s a real Indian Ocean djinn, the only fictional character



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who's taken directly from life), come from all kinds of places. East Africans get possessed by spirits in the form of British officers in knee socks or Danish nurses with syringes. And why not? Don't American kids dress up as Indian chiefs and hula girls? And Europe is full of ex-colonials and of scholars whose careers have been built on their travels to the South. Living rooms all over Europe contain souvenirs from everywhere. And East Africans themselves are in constant motion all the time. The Middle East, the Emirates, especially, India, South Africa, the Comoros and Seychelles, Thailand, Singapore. Tanzanians work on Russian ships, live in Scandinavia, in New York, work on chicken farms in Iowa. There's a whole world of international travel that many Westerners know nothing about. The idea that one place has nothing to do with another is a real fiction, and a bad one at that.

As far as my stories taking place in different regions of the globe . . . my life has taken place that way, and I think writers for the most part are just stuck with what they've lived. In that respect it's not a choice at all. And sometimes I do wish I could know one place and one language so fully that I could write "that" novel. But that would make me belong to a single nation, wouldn't it? And serve some kind of ethnic or national purpose. And though I see the need for literature like that (Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a gorgeous, urgent book), I'm necessarily, helplessly against that. In the movie *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Hedwig, who has crossed the world and lost and gained by it, finally says at her most naked, "I'm working with what I've got." That's really, really stayed with me. Aren't we all doing just that, whoever we might be?

## Questions and topics for discussion

1. Although these stories are set in various disparate places, all of the characters are aware of the existence of other lands and people. How do you think the characters' backgrounds have shaped their expectations of distant places? How might Zulfa or Masoud respond to Sheikh Abdul Aziz if he appeared on Kudra Island? How might Celeste and Gustave's visions of North Africa differ from Osman's or Ayeesha's? In your own life, how do visions of faraway places figure in the choices you make or the dreams you have?
2. In "Pearls to Swine," Celeste sees herself in relation to others in a very particular way. How do you think Petra and Thérèse see Celeste? How might this story be different if it were written from Petra's or Thérèse's perspective?
3. Celeste forms quick judgments of Petra and Thérèse when they come to stay with her. How are the young women different from Celeste's expectations of them? What does Celeste's reaction to them tell us about her?
4. The story "Wondrous Strange" makes reference to many magical elements. If Eva Bright's vision is genuine, what do you think is Sheikh Abdul Aziz's purpose in helping restore George to health? Is there a particular symbolism to the objects required for the ritual? Why do you think

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the author chose to end the story before we learned the outcome of the ceremony?

5. “Wondrous Strange” is told from a number of different perspectives. Which character(s) did you find most compelling, and which least? How does the Sheikh’s message change the lives of each of the main characters: Eva, Flora, and Susan?
6. In “Theft,” among the bus passengers, the locals’ reaction to having been robbed is very different from that of the strangers. Why, even though “it was much worse for them all because their things were more precious” (page 129), do they not try to file a complaint or get their things back? Whose reaction makes more sense to you? If the same incident had taken place in the United States, what do you think the passengers would have done?
7. In “Sisters for Shama,” what are Osman’s feelings towards Shama? Why do you think Shama continues to care for him and let him live in her house? Do you believe his version of the story about why he was exiled from the upper floor?
8. What does Osman hope to accomplish by telling Shama the story of Ayesha and her son? How does Shama’s taking over the storytelling at the end surprise Osman? Has Osman achieved his goal?

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9. On page 216 of “Setting Up Shop,” we are told that “the men of Usilie thought Masoud was doing a good thing” by marrying multiple wives. Given the social and cultural context of the place where Masoud lives, do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?
  
10. Whom do you sympathize with most in “Setting Up Shop”: Zulfa, Masoud, Masoud’s other wives, or another character? Did your answer change over the course of the story as you learned more about each of them?

## Books N. S. Köenings Rereads

*The Magic Toyshop* by Angela Carter

*Waiting for the Barbarians* by J. M. Coetzee

*The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon

*Scented Gardens for the Blind* by Janet Frame

*The Thief's Journal* by Jean Genet

*The Third Man* by Graham Greene

*Dottie* by Abdulrazak Gurnah

*The Nature of Passion* by Ruth Praver Jhabvala

*Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy

*Sputnik Sweetheart* by Haruki Murakami

*Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o



Also by N. S. Koënings

*The Blue Taxi*

A NOVEL

“The world Koënings has created in her accomplished debut is tragic and exhilarating, as is her portrayal of weary, left-behind colonialists, poverty-stricken natives, and the uneasy manner in which each regards the other.” — *Publishers Weekly*

“Mesmerizing. . . . Koënings anchors her characters’ near-constant internal monologues with elegant, concrete details about their everyday lives. . . . Readers who enjoy psychological fiction will be impressed by Koënings’s ability to flesh out the inner landscapes of Vunjamguu’s diverse citizenry, while those concerned with style will appreciate the clear, graceful sentences that simplify the navigation of these multiple realities.” — Leigh Anne Vrabel, *Library Journal*

“Koënings’s debut is lush and charismatic.” — Emily Cook, *Booklist*

“A first-time visitor to any East African city needs an experienced guide. And a visitor to 1970s Vunjamguu, Koënings’s imaginary town, needs something more: an omniscient narrator, attuned to both the streets and the small seismic dramas unfolding in upstairs rooms. . . . *The Blue Taxi* spins with the languor of a dusty ceiling fan: nobody in Vunjamguu is in a hurry to conduct their daily lives, much less to resolve their mounting tensions. Koënings examines the minutiae of her endearingly flawed characters in slow motion and at high, exacting resolution.” — Todd Pruzan, *New York Times Book Review*



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