

## Featured Writer

### LAURA APOL

This April marks 21 years since approximately one million Tutsi and Hutu were killed in the span of 100 days in the Rwandan Genocide. Laura Apol, an award-winning author and associate professor of education at Michigan State University, helped facilitate a series of workshops in Rwanda in 2006 which promoted healing through writing. Having visited Rwanda multiple times since then, Dr. Apol recently published *Requiem, Rwanda*, a book of poetry about healing, hope, and her own experiences learning about the Genocide. The Ampersand interviewed Dr. Apol about her career, her writing, and the ethics of writing poetry on the Rwandan Genocide.

**the &:** You've had quite the career as an associate professor at Michigan State University, a long-time collaborator in a Rwandan writing therapy workshop program, and a successful poet! How did you get into writing in the first place, and what attracted you to fiction and poetry in particular?

**L.A.:** I've written all my life. Even as a young child, I would write poetry as I walked home from school. My father read a lot of poetry to me when I was growing up, so I had a strong sense of rhythm and rhyme (which show up implicitly now in my work, but in my childhood were very explicit). I still have some of those poems: purple sunsets, silver moons... they were pretty terrible. But I was playing with words, which is where poetry begins.

I was good at poetry in high school and college, but those were assignments given by others. I got serious about my own writing when I needed to give voice to thoughts and emotions that weren't permissible in the world in which I lived. I was young; I was married and had a baby, and I'd grown up to think those things should have been enough. But my roles as a daughter, a wife, a mother were in conflict with the other voices that were speaking inside me, things I wanted to do and be in the world—ways I wanted my life to matter beyond the prescriptions and expectations I felt from others. I needed a place to give voice to my growing questions and doubts and fears and dreams. And the only place I could do that was in poems.

So right from the start, poetry was for me a way to make sense of things, to say the things I didn't have other ways to express. And that's what the Rwanda poems were, as well—just on a completely different stage.

**the &:** You mentioned that Paul Celain's "*Todesfugue*" influenced your work on "*Milkefugue*." Do you have any other major writing influences you refer to? Did

your writing influences change during or after this project considering how transformative working on this project was for you?

**L.A.:** When I went to Rwanda for the first time, to work with Rwandan colleagues to plan the writing-for-healing project, I had never been to Africa. I knew almost nothing about the geography, culture, history of Rwanda. So the first reading I did was all about Rwanda, and about colonialism and the role of the West both historically and in present times. I had a lot of backstory that I needed to understand, and a lot of gaps I needed to fill.

Eventually, though, I read—alongside these informational books—poetry that would help me see how other poets dealt with the themes I was trying to express in my own work. My Rwanda poetry was far far different from the other poetry I'd written to that point, so I had much to learn. The Rwanda poems needed to rely on understatement, to leave a reader with the imprint of *what* was being expressed rather than *how* it was being expressed. I wanted the poem to disappear and the story, the person, the insight to remain. I needed to see how other poets did that, and to learn from them in that way.

So I read a lot of poetry of witness—Carolyn Forché's anthology, *Against Forgetting*, along with her own poems and the poems of Adrienne Rich, Lucille Clifton, Margaret Atwood, Brian Turner, Jane Hirschfield, and of course Paul Celan. Many others, too—too many to list. I read collections of Holocaust poems and war poems and poems of trauma. Whenever I travelled to Rwanda I had one whole suitcase filled with books, paper and a portable printer.

**the &:** You mention that churches were often used as slaughter-zones and that many religious leaders participated in the genocide, but the amount of religious references in *Requiem, Rwanda* really struck us. For example, the sections are all titled after liturgical elements, and many of the poems are about or include religious references. So, we were wondering if you could you elaborate on the presence of religion in *Requiem, Rwanda*.

**L.A.:** I think a question that comes up for survivors—and for anyone who learns about genocide, wherever that genocide occurs—is *where was God?* Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel writes, "The survivors [of the Holocaust]...are aware of the fact that God's presence at Treblinka...poses a problem which will remain forever insoluble." (*Legends of our Time*, 6).

I found myself wrestling with that same question in Rwanda, and I heard that question running through and under the stories of survivors. At the

same time, I heard survivors giving testimony that they had been spared by God because there was a plan for them. So all around and within me there was an ongoing struggle to make sense of the role of a divine presence in something as horrific as a genocide.

Added to that is the way that in Rwanda, churches were both a tool of the colonial powers (the same powers that introduced ethnic-based conflict and perpetuated genocide ideology), and, in 1994, a means to gather Tutsi in order to kill them. In past killings of Tutsi, churches had been safe places, and people would go there for protection. But in 1994, people were encouraged to go there and then were killed. It seemed to me to be the ultimate betrayal. In Rwanda now, many of the churches that were the sites of mass killings serve as memorial sites, where those who died are buried in mass graves. So in my experience of Rwanda, encountering the genocide meant encountering the role of the church.

I also was shocked by the ways the clergy often participated in the genocide. It seemed incomprehensible to me that many priests worked as genocidaires, and either knowingly handed over their parishioners to be killed or were active themselves in the killings. Of course, that's not the whole story—there were priests and clergy who were active in saving people, or who died in that process. But those are the stories we expect; for me, the shock and horror of the other stories spoke loudly, and made its way into the poems.

And then finally, the "requiem" format gave me a way to structure the book. I'd struggled with how to arrange the poems so that it was clear I was telling my own experience of Rwanda, rather than speaking for the people I had worked with or read about. The requiem format allowed me to use a recognized and recognizable framework to tell my personal story of being a white woman learning about the complicated history, and the complicated recovery, of the country and its people. Literally, "requiem" means "rest"—and that is what I wanted the book to give back to the people with whom I'd worked. Most people think of a requiem as a funeral mass, and it is sometimes that; but I wanted to imagine that after the deep and incomprehensible grief of the genocide there could be rest—not only for the dead, but also for the living.

There is a long history of writers and composers using the requiem form to grieve, protest, engage, commemorate, speak to a range of contemporary issues. The War Requiem of Benjamin Britten is a piece protesting war using the WWI poetry of Wilfred Owen; there are requiems that use environmental poetry, that commemorate those who were killed in the Holocaust and other genocides, or those who died in political violence or natural disaster. There is a requiem that was inspired by the Arab Spring. So writers and musicians have been working within this format—both for religious and secular topics—for a very long time.

the &: *Requiem, Rwanda* largely stemmed from a program of writing-as-healing, or therapeutic writing. Could you briefly explain what it is and how it works? What is the model for writing-as-healing? Are there steps, phases, or general guidelines?

L.A.: The use of narrative writing to promote healing has been well documented for its therapeutic effects. The rationale for using writing for healing is that, by definition, traumatic memories are characterized as being disorganized and incomplete, existing primarily as fragments, feelings, and physical sensations that occur without warning and at unexpected times.

Therapeutic writing has been proven effective in reducing the effects of PTSD and improving mental health because it allows an individual to organize traumatic memory by converting images and emotions into words and narrative text, giving order and structure to what otherwise is chaotic and out of control. As writers learn that they can move into and back out of painful memories, they begin to associate feelings of control over what have previously been intolerable emotions.

So as a writer I believed in the healing power of writing. And because the country of Rwanda has so much PTSD and so few resources for providing mental health care, a writing-for-healing workshop seemed like a model for low-cost health care delivery that held some promise. That's what led me into this project.

I was working as part of a US team that included a psychiatrist, a pediatrician, an activist, and a translator. I was reading about the power of testimony on the part of survivors of trauma. Eventually the model we created combined a process writing approach (the format) with a therapeutic writing model (the content). In a process approach, writing occurs in multiple steps: brainstorming/freewriting, narrative writing, and revision. The therapeutic model breaks the writing content into three discrete stages: life before the trauma, the trauma itself, and life after the trauma, including hopes for the future. We combined these into a three-step writing process across three stages of participant life-experiences.

Initially we partnered with a mother-daughter team, Rose Mukankaka and Glorieuse Uwizeye, who ran an organization that worked with orphans of the genocide. They are the ones who suggested we do the writing-for-healing with university-aged survivors, and that we train those young people to run the workshops in the various contexts in which they lived and worked.

After we had run the project, the participants became facilitators who themselves used the model with other survivors in other contexts. That was, of

course, our ultimate goal—for the work to be taken up in Rwanda by Rwandans, and for it to go on.

**the &:** Another major concern of *Requiem, Rwanda* was to write as a witness - but how does one write as a witness, to avoid speaking for others that should not be spoken for? And how does one ensure that the story is “told right”?

**L.A.:** I was highly aware throughout the process of writing *Requiem, Rwanda* (which took many years) that there was always the risk of stepping over that boundary, and that I needed to keep asking myself whose story was at the center of what I was doing. If it wasn't mine, I needed to back up and refocus. But of course it was complicated because my story and the stories of the people I met and worked with and grew to love were intertwined. So at times, I was acting as a witness in the service of stories I was told. The epilogue essay that follows the poetry (and a concluding essay is highly unusual in a collection of poems), is my attempt to articulate that struggle, and to admit that it's an imperfect rendering. If I'm writing the poem, I'm necessarily the conduit for the story, and the words and images are coming through my understanding and consciousness. So whose story is it really? I'm not sure I know. I think the key for me was that I tried to whatever extent I was able to be conscious of that risk, and I had writer friends who helped bring it to my awareness as well.

Perhaps the most important way I handled the self/other tension was to bring the poems back to my colleagues in Rwanda before they went to print. I wanted to make sure I'd gotten the facts right (about Rwandan culture and history and the rest), but more importantly, I wanted to know if they wished to be identified in the poems. I didn't want to identify people without their knowing both the poem that they appeared in and the collection as a whole; I also did not want to give someone a pseudonym and erase their story when it was, in fact, an important aspect of our interaction and their life history. I wasn't asking them to edit the poems in which they appeared; I merely wanted them to decide if they wished to be identified by name or if I should use a pseudonym in the poem. This was particularly important because as a poet I sometimes made choices that allowed me to be true to the art of the poem rather than the literal facts of a story, so there were changes—additions, deletions, imaginings—that they had a right to see in advance. In the end, some of my colleagues wished to appear by name in the poems; some did not. I was glad I had asked.

**the &:** Something we thought was particularly interesting was your response to an article that the State News published on March 22, 2013, “*Rwandan Artist Talks Creativity*.” You clarified that artist Emmanuel Nkuranaga noted that there

was a dearth of creative outlets and institutions in Rwanda. We were wondering if you could elaborate on that yourself some more, and what role if any the writing therapy program may have in this.

**L.A.:** I remember that article very well! I had invited an artist from Rwanda, Emmanuel Nkaranga, to spend time on the campus of Michigan State and to work with various groups of students around issues of art education, peace and justice studies, conflict resolution and the like. During that time he did an interview, and the article that came out quoted him as saying that there was a lack of creativity and art in Rwanda. However, I knew Emmanuel well, and I had been at the interview, and what Emmanuel had said was that there was a lack of *outlets* for creativity and art in Rwanda, and that one of his goals as an artist was to create venues for artists of all ages (particularly children) to explore, create, and market their art—in this case, visual art in the form of painting. The distinction is hugely important, because in fact Rwanda has a long history of creativity and art: dance, music, painting, drumming, storytelling. It is a goal of Emmanuel's—and many artists like Emmanuel—to help bring those arts to the foreground, both within and outside Rwanda.

The work I did was a bit different. Rwanda is a strongly oral culture, so there's less written literature in Rwanda. In the writing of stories, we were doing something that was less familiar. That's changing though, and I think in the near future we can all look forward to seeing some great things from Rwandan novelists, poets, playwrights.

**the &:** How can we help the people of Rwanda be heard, to keep their stories alive, and to prevent people returning to the “amnesia” of their lives? How can writers here help?

**L.A.:** I think reading and learning and listening and paying attention are key—not just for Rwanda, but for all the places (and there are so many!) where humans seem bent on destroying one another. There are many projects in Rwanda (and in the world) that work with local people and local agencies to provide various types of support as they work to address issues of trauma, injustice, powerlessness. So we can best “help” by listening to the people themselves—they know and can tell us better than anyone what is helpful, what is necessary, what has ongoing value.

That said, I believe it's important that writers bear witness, and that they push people out of their comfort zones. It's easy to forget. Amnesia feels better when there's something as painful as a genocide that calls us to action. Some people build roads. Some people administer vaccines. Some people support mi-

cro-enterprises. Writers write. They tell stories, because that's what they have to give and because stories can change the world. In a context like Rwanda, though, it's important that the stories include Rwandans in the telling—that Rwandans are not only the "told about" but that they also have a say in how the story is told. Trust needs to be built. Relationships matter.

**the &:** Since you've spent a lot of time abroad, do you have any travel advice or travel writing tips for any student studying abroad?

**L.A.:** Only to keep listening and watching and paying attention. To learn a lot before leaving and to be open to everything along the way.

I try to have a pen and paper with me at all times—they're better than a camera! And I need to remind myself to take time to write—even when (especially when) there is a lot going on. Often I imagine I'll remember later; most of the time, I don't. So I recognize that I need to put things into words in the moment—impressions, scraps of ideas, language that is overheard, details I want to make sure I don't lose—and then take time afterward to fill that writing in. My biggest regret is that I so often have neglected to keep a journal while I travel. In Rwanda, I never go anywhere without a notebook, and it contains both the seeds of what I write and some of the detail that is so important to my work.

**the &:** Finally, what advice do you have for any writers out there, particularly social activists?

**L.A.:** Keep faith. Sometimes it's hard sometimes to believe that writing (particularly poetry) can be a form of activism. And there are a lot of reasons to doubt that this kind of work matters. But there's a long history of ways writers have addressed issues of injustice and have used their voices on behalf of change. I guess I'd say that if you want to write that work, read that work. And then do it. It will teach you.

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Dr. Apol is currently working on a Kinyarwandan translation of *Requiem, Rwanda*. To learn more about the Rwandan Genocide and Dr. Apol's experience, visit the Michigan State University Press website and purchase a copy of *Requiem, Rwanda*. For other works by Dr. Apol, visit her author page on Michigan University Press' website.

## Canticle for the Bones of the Dead

mass  
grave

when the cantor sings  
who sings back

separated from your name

the voice that is yours is scattered  
marrow dried to dust

yet  
I believe

you have something  
to say

## Pink

Her whole family killed by Hutu,  
buried God knows where,  
and she writes the story, dry-eyed,

until she comes to a detail—pink.

Roses in their yard,  
pillow on her bed,  
sandals on her little sisters' feet,

her favorite blouse—pink—  
a gift from her grandmother  
the day she turned twelve.

On that day,  
her mother made sweets.  
Her father gave her  
a notebook and pen.

They wanted her  
to be a teacher;  
she wanted to be a nurse.

They have never seen her teach.  
And she has never had  
another pink blouse.

In the palette of her life  
there is no pink now.

Except each April,  
when the blossoms burst

along the schoolyard walls,  
petals littering the ground.

She has never seen a pink  
so fierce,

but for the convicts' coveralls  
that blaze the hillsides of Butare.

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## Rift

1.

From the sky,  
this land of a thousand hills  
is a place of beauty:

arteries of red-burnt road,  
patchwork greens that ring and rise  
along the hills, the great rift  
valley and rivers carved  
through dappled groves  
of bananas and palms.

What is there here for me,  
umuzungu who watches with words  
a country once torn, beginning  
to heal?

This is no place for me.

2.

The plane touches down, rolls to a stop,  
and the man two rows ahead rises  
to face me—tall, sturdy, thick.  
A giant of a man. He turns to leave:

a man with a scar.

Six inches across, two inches wide,  
a full inch deep,  
it runs the width of his neck  
at the base of his skull.

The tissue is shiny, stretched,  
mottled white against dark scalp.

Scar is not the word.  
It is part of his body gouged out,  
a pound of flesh gone, a visible absence  
—skin, muscle, bone.

He is a man come back from the dead.

I cannot look; I cannot look  
away.

## Milkfugue

Milk is the gift of life. May God make milk for you.  
Living on milk from cattle they do not kill, Tutsi are lean  
and long of limb. There is milk in their mouths, milk  
in their veins, the land flowing with milk—may God make milk  
for you. May God make blood for you: a pact cut under the navel—  
covenant consumed, a belly of blood. Blood in their mouths

and veins; milk in their veins and mouths—they are lean  
and long of limb. Blood is the gift of life. May God make milk  
and blood: past and future wed, from dowry cow  
to milk shared over bloody morning-after sheets. Milk  
for the children, blood for the elders—covenant consummated,  
a belly of milk. May God make milk for you.

Milk is the gift of death. When Tutsi royals must be killed,  
no blood, only milk—and they drink to their death. May God  
make death for you. There is milk in the cup; there is death  
in the cup. They are lean and they drink; milk is death  
and they drink. The White Fathers bring their own cup  
and promise—on altars, doorposts—a land flowing with milk

and a cup of blood. Drink ye all of it. Covenant completed,  
a belly of blood: blood is the gift of death, and they drink.  
In Mata—the month of milk—long limbs are cut until death  
is all there is to drink, every stream—river—well running red.  
Tutsi cattle are bled, Tutsi elders are bled, Tutsi children  
are dead, every red river running—and they drink and they drink.

Blood in the water, blood in the cup, the promised land  
flowing and they drink and they drink. May God make milk  
for you, may God make blood for you. Milk is life is death  
is blood in the cup. Every stream—river—well running red  
and they drink. This is blood and they drink; milk is death  
and they drink. They drink and they drink—all of it.