



2018 Raven Award Winner: Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani for her novel “Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree”

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Each year since 2010, the Raven Foundation has honored an artist whose work creatively represents some aspect of mimetic theory. This year we are honoring Nigerian writer Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani for her young adult novel [*Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*](#), in which a kidnapping victim tells us about her experiences before and during her capture by Boko Haram, the notorious Nigerian terrorist group.

Giving Victims a Voice

The novel is set in a small unnamed village in northeastern Nigeria, where a young girl dreams of acing the Borno State scholarship exam. As she sweeps the floor, helps her mother prepare breakfast, and bathes her little brother in a basin, she dreams of a good harvest for Papa so there will be enough to eat with some money left over for school fees. You see, this nameless girl, the protagonist in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, knows that her future will include “being a good wife who kneels to serve her husband his meals and who bears him healthy sons.” But she wants more. She longs to be the first child in her entire extended family who “proceeds to university after secondary school instead of back to Papa’s farm or straight to my husband’s house.”

But troubling rumors disturb the peaceful pattern of this girl’s life. At home, her father’s radio is tuned to BBC Hausa which reports that “fifty-five people have been killed in the northeast of Nigeria in coordinated attacks by the Boko Haram militant group” whose name means “Western education is forbidden”. In school, a classmate reports on a shootout between police and Boko

Haram in the town where his older brother lives. One of her classmates, a Muslim girl, is already married and she explains that the Islam of Boko Haram is not like the one she and her husband practice. “Their Islam is from inside their heads, not from the Holy Quran,” she says. Pastor Moses leads the congregation in prayer for “our brothers and sisters in other parts of Borno State who are being killed by Boko Haram. May God deliver them from this evil.”

One day the distant threat bursts into her town. As her little brother clutches her leg, the girl hears “the unmistakable sound of roaring engines not far away. And of screaming children. And of angry guns.” Someone throws a firebomb onto the thatched roof of their house and fires a gun directly at her father. “Boko Haram is in our village,” she says. Her dream has become a nightmare.

The Truth About Violence

In 2014, Boko Haram shocked the world by kidnapping 276 girls from their boarding school in Chibok, sparking the international campaign [Bring Back Our Girls](#). The world condemned Boko Haram and anguished over the plight of these innocent girls forced to marry fighters and endure hardship in the Sambisa forest. Nwaubani, a journalist and writer living in Abuja, Nigeria’s capital, was shocked that something like this could happen today. She wanted the world to know about the violence that had plagued this part of her country for years.

Collaborating with Italian journalist Viviana Mazza, she interviewed the girls’ families, traveling to Chibok to learn firsthand about their lives in this forgotten corner of Nigeria. Nwaubani wrote news reports for the BBC, New York Times, and CNN among other news outlets. But she wanted to tell the story from the point of view of the girls, and writing a novel was the most powerful way to give readers access to the girls’ experiences as captives living in the Sambisa forest. “I wanted to give the victims a voice,” she told me. “I wanted the girls’ stories to be heard.” What emerges is a far more complex story than news reports could convey.

In spare language and using short chapters, some no longer than a sentence, Nwaubani is able to portray the devastating impact of violence on the lives of all those involved. Readers begin to realize that victims and perpetrators alike are not served by dividing them up into the innocent and the guilty, the good and the evil, for all suffer emotional and spiritual damage when violence becomes normalized. Nwaubani’s novel creatively illustrates a key insight of mimetic theory concerning the truth about [violence](#): we easily excuse and justify our own violence as good while vigorously condemning the violence of others. The mimetic truth is that good violence is a self-serving illusion. All violence, even our own, contaminates and decimates everything in its path.

The Work of Rescue

More troubling is that easy solutions, such as freeing the girls or defeating Boko Haram militarily, don’t go far enough. They solve the immediate crisis, but Nwaubani’s novel coupled with her [investigative reporting](#) invites us to ask about the underlying causes that allow a group like Boko Haram to take root in the first place. It’s a question worth taking the time to answer, since it is not just Boko Haram that embraces violence in the name of a religious or political cause. Other violent actors such as Al Qaeda, al Shabab, and ISIS all embrace violence as a

means to an end, but so do governments, both authoritarian and democratic. Because faith in violence crosses ideological, religious and political boundaries, children in Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq understand all too well the suffering of the boys and girls from Borno State.

Rescuing the victims of violence means working to end the conditions that allow violence to flourish. As Nwaubani told me, “The harvest was ripe,” in that part of Nigeria because the people lacked education, employment, hope for the future and a higher purpose. Boko Haram offered them a vision of an Islamic State, a heroic mission to establish a Caliphate in fulfillment of God’s will. No matter that most of those who joined the insurgency had not even read the Koran. Boko Haram filled a void and gave them a sense of purpose and self-importance. A non-violent government program or NGO could have come in offering a vision of hope, but they did not and Boko Haram took advantage of that neglect.

Though *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is classified as a young adult novel, this not so young adult enjoyed my reading experience thoroughly. The voice is that of a young girl but the writing style and subject matter are very adult indeed. Nwaubani, however, is happy with the classification because it is her hope that young people who become aware of places in the world that lack education, opportunity, will become adults who work to end the conditions where violence can prosper. With great pleasure, we honor that hope by presenting Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani with the [2018 Raven Award for Excellence in Arts and Entertainment](#). Please join us in congratulating Adaobi; visit [her website](#) to learn more about her career as a Nigerian journalist, essayist, and fiction writer sharing the truth about violence with the world.