**Interview *The Citizen* Tanzania** (18 March 2014)

In an interview with Esther Mngodo for *The Citizen* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania), Lisa Maria says, “we need more storytellers. We need a thousand voices and more in Tanzania. I hope that my writing inspires someone else to write as well.” For the full interview, see: <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz/magazine/success/There-are-not-enough-storytellers-telling-African-stories-/-/1843788/2248536/-/13754gh/-/index.html>.

There are not enough storytellers telling African stories

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**By Esther Mngodo

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**IN SUMMARY**

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Lisa Burgess clearly remembers how her father used to read to her when she was a little girl. Together, they would make up stories and enjoy each other’s company that way. Now that Lisa has children of her own – Matoko (19) and Sena (15) – she has had many made up stories with the two of them.

“I’ve lived inside stories all my life. I tend to think in terms of stories. When my sons were younger, I used to read to them. And oh the joy of making stories with them. It just reminds me of my own childhood,” she says.

But for Lisa and her sons, it didn’t end with just word of mouth. She decided to write a book – a series of four books set in Tanzania – about a boy called Juma, and his family: *Juma and Little Sungura, Juma on Safari, Juma Cooks Chapati,* and *Juma’s Dhow Race*.

“We came to Tanzania in 2007 when Matoko was 13 and Sena was nine, my husband was working with the UN and was posted here. We were in the country for four years until 2010. And while we were here, I noticed that the children’s books were very general. I couldn’t find anything that was specific on the Tanzanian culture, so I decided to write one,” she says.

“When I go back to the United States, children don’t know where Tanzania is or what Kiswahili is. But as soon as I tell them the stories about children in Tanzania, they become very curious,” says Lisa.

‘Juma and little Sungura’, ‘Juma on Safari’, ‘Juma cooks Chapati’ and ‘Juma’s Dhow Race’ – these are the four books in the series. In each story, there is a theme that gives a child something to think about. For instance, in ‘Juma and Little Sungura’ several questions arise such as, where do babies come from? Can boys have babies? And how should we treat a baby? The books, says Lisa, become a platform for parents to start talking to their children about such matters.

In the second story – ‘Juma on Safari’ – the family drives from Dar es Salaam all the way to Moshi and then to the Serengeti. The car breaks down in the plains and then Juma wakes up in the morning to a giraffe licking his face – “This actually happened to my son,” laughs Lisa.

The matter of an American writing about Africans is a long contested one in literary circles, but Lisa sees no problem in it at all. “I am writing for two audiences – for people outside Tanzania and those in Tanzania. It doesn’t matter who tells the story, but that the story is told.

 I think the more people are telling the story the better. In my opinion, there aren’t enough storytellers in Africa. If it is just me, then that would be a problem; we need more storytellers. We need a thousand voices and more in Tanzania. I hope that my writing would inspire someone else to write as well,” she says.

Lisa further explains: “My writing is also collaborative, I write with my sons. They give me ideas. They like the process of making up a story. It is really fun writing with them. It is an enjoyable thing, and it reminds me of my childhood – how I used to make stories with my father.”

Having a background in literature, Lisa worked with the University of Dar es Salaam, teaching Literature when she was living here.

Helping to establish Tanzanian writers and helping them get published is something that Lisa had devoted some time to.

While in Tanzania, Lisa and a colleague from the University of Dar es Salaam, Ms Lilian Osaki facilitated and edited a short story anthology that was published by Mkuki na Nyota Publishers in 2009.

The anthology featured short stories written by the university students and staff of the university.

In 2012, Lisa started Barranca Press, a publishing company that publishes writings inspired by travels.   What inspired her to start Barranca Press? – Her own travelling of course. “Travelling inspires writing.

I wouldn’t have written these books if I had not travelled. When you travel, you get new ideas. And it should go through both directions. We should have Tanzanians writing about Nepal, or Australia – writings that have been inspired by their travels.”

Lisa also believes that a writing culture can only be facilitated through exposing children to written works that interest them and spark their imaginations. She launched the Juma series in Tanzania and did several readings in Dar schools from March 3 – 8 this year.

The readings were done in Dar es Salaam Independent School (DIS), International School of Tanganyika (IST) and Aga Khan Primary School. She also did one reading at A Novel Idea Book Shop that was open to the public.

“The readings in schools were very interesting. They involved children from first grade to fifth grade. Many of them shared the stories that they had written. It was so nice to see that children are being groomed to write stories from an early age. I think this is what we need – to groom writers from childhood,” she says.

Lisa recalls: “As I read ‘Juma and little Sungura’ at Aga Khan Primary School, the children started shouting that they knew where that was – the illustration showed Juma and his family standing near the hospital. It was Aga Khan Hospital! That was so much fun,” she recalls.

Lisa says she wanted to write something that incorporated both the Mainland and the isles of Zanzibar. Hence in the four-book series, we see the family going on safari to Kilimanjaro and then later they visit relatives in Zanzibar.

“I usually get an idea and then I do a lot of revision. I would write something, read it out loud, and change it. Then I would read it to other people, change it. It takes a lot of revision to make it perfect,” she says.

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