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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

While a law student, Ted Oswald lived in Port-au-Prince and worked in Cité Soleil, where he became deeply invested in the community and met the feisty young girl who served as the inspiration for his character Libète. He is an attorney and currently serves as a policy analyst with his wife Katharine in Haiti. *Because We Are: A Novel of Haiti* is his first novel.

To connect, please visit www.tedoswald.com.

All author's royalties from sales of *Because We Are* are donated to nonprofit organizations and community associations working in Haiti.

The following is a list of past beneficiaries:

FONKOZE

fonkoze.org

HAITI PARTNERS

haitipartners.org

INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY IN HAITI /
BUREAU DES AVOCATS INTERNATIONAUX

ijdh.org

MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

mcc.org

OTHER WORLDS

otherworldsarepossible.org

RAJEPRE

wozoayiti.org/fr/node/76

ZAFEN

zafen.org

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Portions of the following interview with Ted Oswald were conducted by Tim Hoiland and David Gaughran, originally appearing on timhoiland.com and davidgaughran.com, respectively.

Tell us about the background of *Because We Are*.

TO: In late 2010, my wife and I lived in Haiti and interned, her as an international development student and me as a law student. The story is set in the community in which I worked, a notorious slum called Cité Soleil. It follows two unlikely detectives—children, brash Libète and brilliant Jak, both amalgams of different kids I encountered there—as they try to solve the mystery behind a murdered mother and her infant child. But the story was always meant to be about bigger themes than that premise suggests: friendship, the struggle for justice in the face of impunity, sacrifice for the community, personal responsibility, faith and doubt in light of tragedy, and the foolishness of scarcity in a world of plenty.

TH: You've made the decision that all of your royalties from book sales go to support the work of a handful of small organizations in Haiti. Why did you choose to take this approach, and how did you choose which organizations to support?

TO: Much of the book was inspired by my experiences in Haiti, especially in Cité Soleil, and it somehow felt strange to profit financially from it. This model seemed a way to gather the indirect

support of others—through the purchase of the book—to a country and people that changed my life.

Many are familiar with Haiti's travails in passing. The legacy of slavery, rapacious leaders, political instability, endemic poverty and inequality, and natural and manmade disasters makes for an incredibly complicated context.

The organizations who have and will continue to benefit from book sales have long-standing commitments to partnering with Haitians; they have great reputations and proven track records in their different areas of work, be they human rights advocacy and promotion, education, microfinance, conflict resolution, or improving the environment.

Ultimately, I admire examples of generosity spurring generosity, and this seemed an interesting way to tie readers into the book's special context and themes.

DG: What are your literary influences? What do you like to read?

TO: Consuming Edwidge Danticat's work was a prerequisite to writing this; other specific influences (besides Alan Paton's oeuvre) include Dave Egger's *What is the What* and more light-hearted fare like Alexander McCall Smith's *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* series. I'm taken with Graham Green's writing, and am catching up on more contemporary literary fiction that fell by the wayside during my legal studies. Probably not a surprise, but I also appreciate nonfiction centered on Haiti.

TH: When people read *Because We Are*, what kinds of responses would mean the most to you? Is the book simply a way to support the work of great organizations, or do you hope *Because We Are* becomes something more than that?

TO: Beyond the desire to draw attention to great organizations and aid their work, the book is an ambitious and emotional story in its own right. I'll be pleased if even a few readers enjoy it and recommend it to others. But I do dream of something more.

The novels that have stuck with me over the years are ones that have something profound to say to society—books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and *Native Son*. These are works of fiction that developed me as a person, and in turn impacted the world through my actions.

While not a polemic, *Because We Are* is also not a simple murder mystery. It has pointed criticism of the injustices that have led Haiti to become one of the most inequitable countries in the world, while telling a compelling story about two remarkable children struggling to see a grievous wrong righted. If *Because We Are* “sticks” with readers, if it can stir some reflection, growth, and action, well, that would have to be the fulfillment of my greatest hope.

DG: Do you have any more adventures planned for Libète and Jak?

Those two have been on my mind as of late! I've published two other short mysteries set prior to *Because We Are* that follow them, and each is a breezy little story that I think anyone who enjoys the full-length novel will also appreciate. They're entitled *The Bloodied Birds* and *The Kings of Nothing*. I've also been diligently plotting a story arc that would carry them through two further novels.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What impacted you most about the story?
- What aspect of life in contemporary Haiti as portrayed in the book is most troubling to you? Is there anything you can imagine doing that might impact that reality for the better?
- Which characters' journeys resonated with you?
- A consistent struggle for Libète is how to confront injustice and human suffering. How do you respond to these in your local community, country, or around the world? Look away? Learn more about events or issues? Engage and try to affect change? Is there anything from Libète's story that is helpful or inspiring when considering a response?

- Late in the book, Elize takes Libète to the beach and describes how, despite life's difficulties, he is able to retreat into beauty and prayer to sustain himself. When faced with struggles and difficulties—whether your own or others'—how do you sustain yourself?

- The book's name is inspired by *Ubuntu* and the ethical concept's summarizing phrase “I am because we are.” In short, it means my humanness or humanity is tied up in my community which defines and sustains me. Ubuntu is generally marked by a warmth and care for the “other,” whether that person is a neighbor or stranger. Do you see examples of Ubuntu lived out in your community that inspire you? What about around the world?

- In the book, shortly after the earthquake, foreign aid workers try to distribute food to survivors. It causes fighting and conflict. The narrator remarks, “Compassion is not as easy as the givers would like it to be.” The book highlights the tension between well-intentioned international aid or charity efforts and their sometimes negative outcomes. These can include fostering dependence, creating bloated international organizations that produce few results, creating tensions between recipients and non-recipients, and by assuming government's core responsibilities so that the government can abdicate its responsibilities to its people. If you support an organization that does relief or development work, what criteria do you look for before making the decision to donate your time or money?

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

The following originally appeared as a contribution by Ted on The Undercover Soundtrack, a blog where author Roz Morris invites other writers to explore the role of music in their creative processes.

During the drafting and revision stages of *Because We Are*, I relied upon particular albums and songs to snap me right back to Haiti; to again feel the unrelenting sun baking my skin, to get lost in a sea of spoken Kreyol, to recall hours spent walking vibrant city streets. But beyond a cheap return trip, music often helped define my characters and themes.

Nibo

Special mention is reserved for a song entitled *Nibo*. This version is inspired by a piece written by Haitian composer Ludovic Lamothe, the original recording of which was captured by famed ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax during a trip to Haiti. Martha Jean-Claude recorded a version with lyrics in the 1970s that immediately captured my imagination. More recently, Nibo has been given new life as a choral piece, *Gede Nibo*, by composer Sten Kellman. Every time I hear the song's melody — whether brought to life by a plinking piano or a 40-person a capella ensemble — it powerfully captures the mood, tone, and mystery of *Because We Are*.

Vodou and Rock

Konpa is a modern-day méregue played by prominent Haitian artists like Djakout #1, T-Vice, and sometimes Wyclef Jean (of The Fugees fame). Along with *Mizik Rasin* (roots music) which blends

folk Vodou elements and rock (Boukman Eksperyans is one notable group), acts like these could be heard emanating from countless radios across Port-au-Prince. I was particularly moved by Atis Indepandan's folk album from the mid-70s called *Ki-Sa Pou-N Fe?* or *What is to be Done?*. Listening to any of these strains of Haitian music helped to capture the manic intensity, humor, romance, suffering, piety, resilience, ribaldry, pain, joy, and sadness that so often come day-to-day in Haiti.

Protest Music

Lastly, *Because We Are* is a story of protest. When volunteering in Cite Soleil, I taught an English class for young men using socially-conscious rap and hip-hop songs. Though they weren't Haitian, artists like Talib Kweli (*The Beautiful Struggle*), Mos Def (*New World Water*), and The Roots (*Dear God 2.0*) capture a view of the world from the bottom up, reflecting the lived experience of my characters Libète and Jak and the young men I taught. I often found myself coming back to these artists and songs for inspiration along the way.

RECOMMENDED READING

NONFICTION

Haiti: The Aftershocks of History by Laurent Dubois

Farewell, Fred Voodoo by Amy Wilentz

The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster by Jonathan M. Katz

Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance by Beverly Bell

Fault Lines: Views Across Haiti's Divide by Beverly Bell

FICTION

All Souls' Rising by Madison Smartt Bell

Haiti Noir edited by Edwidge Danticat

Haiti Noir 2: The Classics edited by Edwidge Danticat

Children of Heroes by Lyonel Trouillot

The Dew Breaker by Edwidge Danticat

In Darkness by Nick Lake