

## **Branford Boase Award Q&A interview with Natasha Bowen and Carmen McCullough, author and editor of *Skin of the Sea***

Rooted in West African mythology and history, ***Skin of the Sea*** is a beautiful reimagining of *The Little Mermaid*. Simidele or Mami Wata is tasked to collect the souls of deceased West African people thrown overboard from passing slave ships and usher them to the afterlife. But unlike the other Mami Wata, she is troubled by confusing visions of her past life as a human. When she saves a young man from drowning, her actions have dire consequences.

The **Branford Boase Award** judges found it epic in scale with a great premise, and describe the worldbuilding as ambitious but perfectly successful.

### **Q&A with author Natasha Bowen**

The **Branford Boase Award** judges loved the way you use myth in your book. How did you approach that and what was the most rewarding aspect of it?

Exploring West African myths in ***Skin of the Sea*** was a way to understand what my ancestors believed, the tales they told and the way they morphed over time. In this book I wanted to pay tribute to seldom highlighted traditional stories. So many of us love mermaids, fairies, and shapeshifters but we've experienced these through a standard euro-centric lens... where are the stories that come from other cultures? What view and depth do they give to magical beings? And how did these African myths merge and change with history and spirituality? What beliefs and tales were used as a coping mechanism and as a way to endure the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade? That certain traditional stories were preserved, even as Africans were enslaved and displaced, is so very powerful. This is what I wanted to explore. I see the spread of these myths across the diaspora as magnificent and to be able to showcase some of them in ***Skin of the Sea*** was extremely rewarding.

### **What was the thing you most enjoyed about working with your editors on the book?**

I enjoyed having two experienced and creative points of view. Being questioned by both of these talented editors in various areas of my writing helped me to understand and process the book in deeper ways. Both Tricia and Carmen were extremely supportive and understanding of what a book like ***Skin of the Sea*** was trying to convey. We were all united in the vision for this story and there was a complete air of collaboration and celebration that made the editing process very rewarding.

### **Do you have a favourite scene in the book? Can you describe it for us?**

My favourite scene is when Yinka is plaiting Simi's hair because there are important layers to this part of the story. First, the intimacy that this act brings, the closeness of sitting between someone's knees, having their fingers in your hair while you surrender your personal space. Spending hours with your neck crooked and someone so close to you requires a lot of patience and trust from both people. Second, the skill needed to braid hair is often underrated so add to that the ingenuity and cleverness of plaiting maps (documented by enslaved resistance in the diaspora) gives the act superhero levels.

This scene is pivotal too because it is a defining moment in Simi and Yinka's relationship. Being stuck for hours together only helps them to break down some initial barriers and begin to develop more of an understanding for one another.

**You had to carry out historical research for the story. How did you use that and how did that affect the editing process, e.g. deciding what needed to be in and what left out?**

Black history doesn't start with slavery and so West African history has been a passion of mine for many years. I used fifteenth century history as the setting for **Skin of the Sea** as it coincides with the change in some people's beliefs of Yemoja and of Black mermaids in general. A goddess of rivers and streams, some believe that she left her home to follow the first enslaved. Stories of Yemoja following slave ships to offer comfort, destroy or return the souls of those who died back home, became a frame for the book. Since the transatlantic slave trade was such an integral part of how West African myths and spirituality changed, I wanted the story to contain, but not focus on this. What was important, even more so after the atrocities of that period, was a light on African advances in mathematics, architecture, and art, to name just a few examples. This was a focus of my historical research and a motivating force in writing the book. I wanted a story that centred itself on African excellence and opulence, on family and courage. With all this in mind, the plot and characters took shape.

There are many more powerful events and aspects that did not make it into **Skin of the Sea**, but that is what sequels are for.

### **What advice would you give to debut writers?**

When your debut is published, remember how much hard work and passion has gone into your story. Be proud of what you have created and be kind to yourself. Give thanks for all that you have achieved and remember, reviews are subjective!

### **Q&A with editor Carmen McCullough, who edited the book with Tricia Lin**

#### **What was it about Natasha's writing that most excited you about her book?**

I thought Tasha's writing was absolutely stunning from the first line. There is a lyrical quality to Tasha's prose that is so atmospheric. The way she describes the landscape and Simidele's movement through the sea is incredibly evocative. I absolutely felt I was there with the sun beating down on me, the smell of the sea in my nose and the cold water surrounding me. I was also in awe of how Tasha balanced the very difficult aspects of the story – exploring the trauma that enslaved people experienced – alongside the dangerous quest she and her new allies must take as well as a romance that has the power to destroy the world. Only the most skilful of writers are able to manage so many story elements so successfully.

#### **What were the main things you worked on with her as editor?**

Tasha has a spectacular imagination and had so many wonderful ideas and directions that the story could take so primarily we worked on streamlining those ideas – developing the strongest route and ensuring it felt clear and compelling for YA readers. We could immediately see that the West-African mythology within the story as well as the romance between Simidele and Kola were the most compelling elements of the book so we were keen to draw these out even more – bringing this powerful sense of star-crossed lovers to the forefront and spending more time with the orisas who were all such fascinating characters.

#### **What do you think marks out the most successful YA writers?**

Writing stories with strong concepts that spark excitement in readers, characters you can feel properly invested in and a good editor who can provide that all-important fresh pair of eyes and can help you shape and develop your story within the context of the wider market.

#### **What do you find most satisfying about being an editor?**

The most exciting part of being an editor is that collaborative and creative relationship with the author. My favourite thing is when you can be a springboard for the author's own imagination – for example, when you point out that a scene isn't quite working and make some suggestions for how to rethink it and then the author responds with their own ideas for how to tackle the problem – usually far better than my suggestions as they know their own story inside out.

**What advice would you give anyone wanting to write for a YA readership?**

I would say read widely within the YA space and the specific genre you want to write within. Look at what readers are connecting with in terms of plot, character and concept. I would also think about your one-line pitch – how would you sum the story up in one sentence to get agents/publishers/readers excited. And most importantly write what you enjoy. If you are enjoying writing the story then there's a much stronger chance that your intended audience will too!

**Skin of the Sea** is published by Penguin, 978-0241413975, £7.99 pbk.

Thank you to **Natasha Bowen** and **Carmen McCullough** for answering our questions.