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Other People's Hats – Writing the Not-Self

Unless you're writing a memoir, most writing is the exploration of the Not-Self. We read to get out of our own heads and write, to get into other people's.

The act of fiction is to interrogate the imagination, to ask questions such as: 'What's it like to be a murderer, a geisha, a prisoner, a genius?' The skilled writer can get readers to empathize with characters vastly different from themselves. An honest writer can wear different hats, see through different lenses and faithfully report what they find.

In recent decades, the freedom to roam our imaginations has encountered border controls and visa requirements centered around one thorny issue. Permission.

Are we allowed to try on any hat we like, speak with anyone's tongue, or put on someone else's dress? If we are fair skinned, do we have permission to twerk?

The most famous manifesto in this culture war came from Lionel Shriver, which she delivered in Australia, wearing a sombrero. The 2016 speech and its backlash, well documented and stoked by the Guardian, threw up many questions, among them, this one: "When a white male author writes as a young Nigerian girl, is it an act of empathy, or identity theft?"

I had to confront none of these questions with my first novel *Chinaman*. I was a 32-year-old Sinhalese male writing in the voice of a 64-year-old Sinhalese Drunk. No one took offense, in fact, middle-aged drunk men now form a core of my audience. As Stephen the King says, "**Give me just enough information so that I can lie convincingly.**"

My second book featured a war photographer, gambler, and closet gay protagonist. I could YouTube my way through Kodachrome photography and bluff at being a gambler, but was I, a cisgender hetero, allowed to write from the viewpoint of a closeted gay Sri Lankan man?

In Hollywood, we used to have Charlton Heston in shoe polish playing the Mexicano, a brown Peter Sellers doing *Goodness Gracious Me*, and, most egregiously, Mickey Rooney playing My Yunoshi in the iconic *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. These days, we have period pieces with people of color sitting on thrones, and Bangladeshis and Puerto Ricans get to play themselves. Some say we've come so far, others say we've gone too far.

The Netflix documentary *Disclosure* features transgender actresses complaining of only getting roles as dead prostitutes on *CSI: Whatever* or as the gender-confused serial killer who snuffs them. When a

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complex, well-written trans role comes up, it goes to Eddie Redmayne or Jared Leto, who then grow beards and hetero up when receiving their Oscars.

Should a white male author write as a young Nigerian girl, when young female African writers are ignored by the publishing industry? This is a straw man argument, but one I may have to face with a story I am thinking of.

For over a decade, I have waited for a Sri Lankan Anne Frank to emerge from our carnage. None so far. As a father of a seven-year-old daughter, I am aware of one startling fact. Seven-year-old girls have more depth, originality and soul than your average 30-year-old man. Must I stay in my lane and write about drunk, middle-aged bores? If no one is writing Sri Lanka's Anne Frank story, may I?

The challenge for a Sinhala male from Colombo to speak in the voice of a young Tamil girl in the war zone is immense. Some may say not worth attempting. Are there really uncrossable boundaries in our dreamscapes? May I write as an old lady, a torture victim, a blind savant, or a half-Israeli, half-Palestinian two-spirit pansexual?

My response, which I guess makes me Team Shriver, is why-ever-the-hell-not? We despise our shoe polish Hestons and yellow-face Rooneys because it is clear that neither actor nor filmmaker had any regard for or interest in the character they were portraying.

As Author of Little Bee, Chris Cleave conceded, "Do I as an Englishman have any right to write a story of a Nigerian woman...? I completely sympathize with the people who say I have no right to do this. My only excuse is that I do it well."

And this, I would submit, is the only rule here. If you're going to write the Not-Self, especially a flawed Not-Self or a less privileged Not-Self, you must do the homework, understand the voice and be true to what it tells you.

So go forth, explore all the Not-Selves that haunt or move you, even the problematic ones. But do it with skill, diligence, and a well-tuned ear. If the hat fits, try it on. Just make sure you know enough before you attempt to lie.

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