

# Jake Lamar: On Writing

Author of a memoir, five works of fiction, and awarded the Grand Prix du Roman Noir Étranger for the French translation of *The Last Integrationist*, African-American writer Jake Lamar talks about the writing process from a quiet café in the 18<sup>th</sup> district of Paris.

BY VIRGINIA LARNER

We met at Chez Ginette, his favorite café located midway between his apartment and writing studio. This friendly bistro is pocketed away from the noisy rumble of tourist coaches that daily besiege the popular sites of historic Montmartre.

Jake Lamar had agreed to talk with me about his own writing and publishing, as well as about creative writing workshops that he has given recently. His warmth, openness, and just plain friendliness struck me as he answered questions about ways to write and teach fiction.

**VL: Which writers have influenced your writing?**

**Lamar:** You know, it's a really long list. Everyone from Virginia Woolf to Faulkner and Milan Kundera to Don DeLillo. I have pretty broad tastes.

But, there were four works that I read when I was young that made me want to be a writer. I remember this distinctly. It must have been seventh or eighth grade, and I read *Black Boy* by Richard Wright; *Go Tell It on the Mountain* by James Baldwin;

liked storytelling too, just for the enjoyment of it. That was what that murder mystery was about. But reading those four writers made me think I could go further with this. I hadn't realized that the lives of ordinary black Americans could be literature.

**VL: Do you feel you are in the tradition of African-American writers, such as James Baldwin or Richard Wright, as the myth has it, inspired by creative freedoms to come to Paris?**

**Lamar:** I love and admire the African-American and American writers who came here before I did, but if you're speaking about the black writers in particular, my reasons for coming here were just different. I grew up in a different time. I think Richard Wright really was in exile here. He actually said "I choose exile." And after a certain point, it would have been dangerous for him to go back to the States because he would have been crucified by the House Un-American Activities Committee. But in the case of James Baldwin, I don't think he really could have become a writer if he hadn't come to France. Getting away from the pervasive racism of America in that era and

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## *A Letter from Paris*



*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison; and *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry.

I had been a voracious reader since I learned how to read. But discovering those works was the first time that I read about the lives of people I recognized in my daily life, people like my family, like myself. It was the first time that I saw that the lives of ordinary black Americans could be turned into literature. And I think that's why those books had such a profound effect on me and made me realize that I wanted to do this, too. I wanted to write about life as I saw it.

The first short story I remember writing was a murder mystery set in a country mansion, a little like Agatha Christie. I wrote that story in the seventh grade at probably the same time I was being introduced to those writers. My brother and I used to make up little comic strips and draw all the characters. So, I

being able to live in France gave him the freedom of expression that he didn't have. Chester Himes wasn't happy anywhere. He wasn't happy in the States. He wasn't happy in France. He wasn't happy in Spain. He was a grouchy guy. But, I do know from reading the first volume of his autobiography that he certainly felt more at ease, freer, in Europe than in the States, though he also had plenty of complaints about life here.

**VL: Born and raised in the Bronx and having planned to stay here for a year, how is it that you have remained in Paris since 1993?**

**Lamar:** In my case, I really came out of curiosity. Though there were plenty of things that troubled me about racial politics in America, I did not feel that racism was such an oppressive force in my life that I needed to escape it in order to write. I really never expected to stay. I was a writer before I came here.

I'm a writer wherever I am. So I think, you know, if I were living in London or Amsterdam or South America, I would still be writing. But I feel most at home in Paris.

I just fell in love with the city and kept living here until I met "la femme de ma vie" after a few years, and that was when I decided I wouldn't be going back. But, my choice to be here is not a choice against the U.S.; it is a choice for France, and I like to emphasize that because I do not feel in exile. I'm an expatriate, but I'm not in exile.

I go back less and less because of basic inertia. Friends and family come to visit, and I spent two weeks in New York last year. I have my little faithful readership in the States. That's why my publishers continue to publish me. I'm not a big bestseller, but I have enough of a loyal readership that I can continue to publish.

Right now, it's St. Martin's Press, but I've had three different publishers, which is just a sign of the volatility of the American publishing business. I got my first contract in 1989, and I feel as if I'm talking about some golden age of publishing. It seems like such a long time ago that publishers would publish a writer because they liked him and his work. They knew they would not make their money back, but they had enough writers who were bringing in money. I think the change in strategy is tragic.

That is not how it functions in France, I can tell you. At Rivages Noir, François Guérfif publishes a work that he loves. If he reads a writer and responds, he's not thinking about profit and loss. He's got a thousand titles available, and he does not take his titles out of print. He started his collection in 1986, and all of the books are still in print.

**VL: Is that unusual?**

**Lamar:** I don't know. I don't talk to publishers in France about the business in such detail. I know that Guérfif has bought the rights of the thriller *Ghosts of Saint-Michel*, my fourth book with them. That's more books than I've published with any single American publisher. In America they take a book out of print after a year and a half if it isn't selling like hotcakes.

My dream was always to have one publisher who would take care of my work. And I've found it in France.

Yet, I have had the same agent in America for nineteen years. In a way, agents have replaced editors as the people who are loyal to writers. If you can find an agent who believes in you and your work, you can continue publishing; publishers don't have that kind of fidelity to a writer anymore. In France the whole agent thing has not caught on. Most publishers prefer to deal directly with the writer.

**VL: Last summer you ran a weeklong Writing Intensive Tutorial at the WICE Paris Writers Workshop. How did you organize it?**

**Lamar:** I enjoyed it much more than the other workshops I've taught. Besides a few weekend workshops at WICE, I taught the weekend-long summer workshop in creative non-fiction in 1995. Yet, I much prefer the WIT format. I really like to plunge into completed manuscripts and give editorial advice on what

the writers should do with their pieces. You might ask how much writers can find to talk about in a week. Well, we could have kept going a second week. We talked about the works in such detail. Each manuscript was so different and interesting in its own way that it was really fun and gratifying—truly intensive.

Every morning we met as a group for two hours; before or afterwards, I met with each author for an hour every day so we really got to talk about his work in detail. And in some cases, with one writer in particular, we talked a lot about the process, rather than the work at hand—how you go about writing, how you go about structuring your life around writing.

So I found it really gratifying, and I know the students were pleased at the end. But it was a different kind of approach, and it was rewarding for me. I think this is going to be a permanent feature of the WICE summer workshop. But it's demanding of the teacher to have to read 1,500 pages for each writer before the classes have even begun.

We talked about one assignment I gave each of them. It was to come up with an alternative title. I thought three of the four pieces could have used a better title. One writer had written a novel entirely in the first person. I advised her to try to write a short chapter from the perspective of one of the secondary characters. But we were dealing so much with how to revise what they had right there so we didn't do a lot of writing in the course of the week. It was really a lot about structure.

I gave them some pretty drastic advice. I told one writer, "Lose this character." I asked others to cut out one or more characters. I gave them advice on rearranging chapters—on breaking up the books into parts. I think it was surprising for a few of them who had been in workshops before. I don't know how other teachers go about this, and I think that sometimes people are more abstract in their handling of the students. But I really approached it in a very hands-on, nuts-and-bolts way, and I think they appreciated that.

I wasn't particularly hard on anyone, but I don't think they were used to hearing things like "You've got to lose this character." It changes the whole structure of a book to cut out a character, to lose maybe forty pages. One of these writers in particular had had her doubts about this character, so she was actually pleased to hear that. Sometimes the writers just didn't know how to divide the chapters up in a satisfying, coherent way. But, of course, as a writer of six books, I've had to deal with these questions of structure and character and enhancing theme. This has been the stuff of my daily life for a long time, so I think they did learn from what I had to offer as a teacher, but it was also an editorial task.

**VL: Did they also read what the others had written?**

**Lamar:** Oh, yes. Everyone had read everyone else's work. With the Writing Intensive Tutorial there were only four brave souls who stepped forward. I think they were much admired by the other participants in the workshops because they had had the guts to submit an entire manuscript. So, I realized that as the week was wearing on, the others thought they really put it on the line there. We also talked about publishing. I feel more

strongly all the time that here is a huge gulf between writing and publishing. They are completely different endeavors. So I tried not to have the conversation melt from one to the other. We saved the publishing conversation for the last day. The rest of the time we talked about making the manuscripts as good as they could be.

**VL: What problems of translation have come up in your own writing?**

**Lamar:** What's interesting is that I've worked with three different translators now. My first two books translated into French by Nicholas Masek were *If 6 were 9* (translated as *Le caméléon noir*), and the other was *The Last Integrationist*, which was called *Nous avons un rêve*. After this translator moved to Russia, my publisher found a team of French women: Catherine Cheval and Stephanie Carn. They took many more liberties with the original text. It was a little disconcerting at first, but I think all their choices were good ones.

I read my French translations out loud with my French tutor an hour and a half once a week. He follows along with the English version. Many times with *Rendezvous Eighteenth*, he would stop me and say that was not what I had said. We would look at what I had written in English, and then we would look at the French translation, and every time we decided they had come up with something better than what we might find. French has a very serpentine structure, and it's not always easy to make it have the same energy as the English version.

**VL: Your last two novels, *Rendezvous Eighteenth* and *Ghosts of Saint-Michel*, are set in Paris, different from former fiction and an early memoir (*Bourgeois Blues*) that are rooted in**

**distinctly American racial issues and events. Have your interests and themes changed or broadened? Or are they being transplanted?**

**Lamar:** I find that in all my books I return again and again to this question of self-definition. How do people choose to identify themselves? What is the most important element in your idea of who you are? Is it your nationality, your religion, your ethnicity, your sexuality? I think that identity is a much more elusive thing than some people want to acknowledge. Once I changed the setting of my books from the USA to France, those questions became all the more complex. For example, there is the case of the African-American Ricky's relationship with Fatima in *Rendezvous Eighteenth*.

So, my interests have both broadened and been transplanted. The novel I'm writing now is about an elderly European painter looking back on her eventful life.

**VL: Do you think that multi-cultural and ethnic concerns are being addressed in current French fiction? By young writers?**

**Lamar:** I don't want to pretend to know too much about the French literary scene, but I do think these questions are being addressed by a new generation of writers: there is Faïza Guène, the young woman who wrote *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* (*Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*); Gaston Kelman; Georges Yémy, the young author of *Suburban Blues*; Marie N'Diyae...I'm sure these concerns will be a growing theme in the years to come. 

—Virginia Lerner is Chair of the English Department at the American School of Paris.

## Think Globally, Meet Locally

Did you know that the ALSC provides mini-grants for flyers and refreshments for local meetings? The ALSC is a global entity comprised of many scattered islands and archipelagoes of like-minded literati. The ALSC Website, blog, and Facebook group allow us to “meet globally,” but electronic chats are no substitute for live readings and discussions over wine and cheese. And though we do have the chance to meet en masse each year, not everyone can make it to the annual conferences. We need your help to bring our scattered literary communities together throughout the year and to spread the word about the Association. For information about meeting organization and sponsorship, contact us today at [alsc@bu.edu](mailto:alsc@bu.edu).