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# “THERE IS ANOTHER WORLD IN OUR WORLD”: A CONVERSATION WITH J. M. LEDGARD

By Philip Gourevitch April 30, 2013

Some critics have compared J. M. Ledgard’s novels to the writings of W. G. Sebald, Italo Calvino, and J. M. Coetzee. Others have found his books overly cosmic in their preoccupations and ambitions, and too lavishly written. They are, in fact, more original, more singular, and more surprising than either of these camps suggest. The opening pages of his first novel are narrated by a newborn giraffe. That book, “Giraffe,” from 2006, was inspired by a historical massacre of forty-nine captive giraffes in Communist Czechoslovakia, in 1975. Ledgard, a Scot, learned of this episode while based in Prague for his day job—as a foreign correspondent for the Economist. More recently, he was posted in Nairobi as that magazine’s East Africa correspondent, a beat that took him repeatedly to war-blighted Somalia, where much of his second, newly published novel, “Submergence,” takes place. The book’s leading man, James More, is a British spy who is taken captive by jihadi fighters of Al Shabab. Danielle Flinders, his female counterpart—and long-distance lover—occupies what seems an entirely unrelated realm: she is a French-Australian marine biologist who is trying to understand life in the deepest reaches of the ocean. Running separately and together, their stories become dramatic explorations of conditions far larger than their individual destinies—a meditation on our species and our planet at a time heavily shadowed by the prospect of extinction. As Ledgard told me in the course of this interview, conducted by e-mail and over the phone, he writes in part to give expression to the worlds within our world that remain “unknowable and unknown.”

*The two main characters in "Submergence" are a spy who is being held captive by jihadis in Somalia, and a marine biologist. You're a reporter in East Africa who has worked a lot in and around Somalia, but where does your fascination with oceanography come from?*

I was born in the Shetland Islands, in Scotland, so I was bewitched by the ocean from the start. I spent my infancy on a wild and beautiful beach looking out at the Atlantic and breathing it in. When I got older, I messed around on skiffs and worked on fishing boats. In terms of science, what really had an influence was getting on a science expedition to the North Pole—sailing through the Bering Straits—and later being a visiting fellow at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, in Massachusetts. The professors at Woods Hole, particularly the mathematicians, left me with a wonderment about the scale of life on our world. It was so much bigger and differently distributed than I had known. It was like being made aware of the weight of your own limbs.

On the other side, as you say, I have been an Africa correspondent and I have been lucky to have travelled in Somalia, met with jihadist fighters, and tracked Al Qaeda commanders, so that is a very real and lionhearted place to me, and I wanted to represent it accurately, even if it is meant in my novel to stand for something bigger.

*How did you come up with More and Flinders and their very particular stories to carry all that you were thinking about?*

Neither of them is based on a real person. But obviously James is based on a lot of research. Working with the *Economist*, I used to have good contacts with people in the intelligence worlds, in the British Secret Service, and I got a sense of how their life is. That comes from what they tell you, but it's much more than they can tell you. One bizarre thing that happened with James More is that as I invented this character, basing him slightly on some intelligence people I have known, it came to my attention that there was this French Spy, Denis Alex, a real French Secret Service agent, who was captured in Somalia and held in exactly the same circumstances that I had imagined and described for James More. So I kept up with his story to see how would it turn out—and, not to give too much away, what happened to James More really happens, and I think that gives it an additional kind of gravity.

We have, in Western Civilization, an intellectual inheritance, an inheritance of jurisprudence, that we kind of need in order to know what we stand for—not in a

rah-rah way, but in an internal way. And for me, James More is a character who really draws out what it means to be able to examine your beliefs, what it means to have the freedom to really challenge your beliefs.

With Danielle, too, I had a sense of the world she came from. I met a lot of oceanographers and mathematicians, and from them I think I drew her sense of exploration. There is even something kind of heroic about her. I mean, she's tough, and a little bit cold—I'm not sure she's entirely sympathetic—but the discoveries that she's making are colossal in terms of time and space. And, not to hammer it, but her name, Flinders, means shatters, and there was some sense for me of her shattering the truth. I think she even says she is opening up another world in our world, which again is a reflection on our rational empirical inheritance.

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*You say Danielle is heroic but perhaps not entirely sympathetic. It seems a couple of your jihadi characters, James More's captors, are obviously no heroes, but you imagine them sympathetically.*

You have to acknowledge their humanity, even as they're being barbaric in all senses of the word. It's one of the lessons I learned long ago, reporting in the post-Communist environment in Russia and Eastern Europe. I became a really strong

anti-Communist at that point, just seeing what that world was and had done. But, after a while, you get into these stories and you realize people whom you see as totally different have all these other characteristics, and you're able to find points of deep connection even with people you disdain.

I remember this one moment in northern Somalia quite distinctly. I was interviewing a very extreme jihadist-sympathizing mullah in the backroom of his mosque. You can imagine the room: carpet on the floor, it's dark and dusty, and on the carpet is this guy pronouncing fire and brimstone and the end of times for diabolical America, and behind him on the wall in a frame was a sura of the Koran and a picture of bin Laden in finger-wagging mode. And then there was this picture of Thierry Henry, the Arsenal player. So there he is pronouncing how he's going to lay low the Western world, and then he's asking me will his beloved Arsenal win the league.

I'm sure these Chechen brothers in Boston are even more entangled in this kind of impossible interplay. What it comes down to is that it's a complete nonsense to think you can strip an adversary, however much a barbarian, of humanity. The fact that these are real and serious adversaries tells you they have a system, and structures, a purpose and complexity. We need to understand that. And it always struck me, too, in Somalia, that they are really just incredibly tough. They knew what they'd gotten into, they were in it, and that's it. They fight until they drop.

*And how did you come to think of entwining the seemingly unrelated worlds of a hostage submerged in the slipstream of current events, and of a scientist submerged in biological time?*

"Submergence" is an attempt at what I would call planetary writing, which is not the same as nature writing, it's more political, more discarnate. Somalia here is scorched and hard, but it is also mutable and passing, and the same is true for the pain and the beliefs in the novel. So there is on the surface a narrative where human lives are played out and they matter so very much and are insignificant all at once. Whereas the ocean is confounding in another way, you have no breath in it, no light, and consequently no imaginable human life, yet it is immutable, and when you stack it up you find it is nearly all of the living space on the planet. What I wanted to do was to alter the reader's perspective of Earth, to show that dirt is precious but seawater dominates, to step out on a field is rare while to float and scintillate with bioluminescence is common.

*You take on these planetary conditions, but the action in the book is very confined in space and time. We enter most expansively into your cosmic preoccupations through the claustrophobia of cramped captivity in Somali hideaways, and of the deep dive in the cockpit of the submersible.*

What is true of space is also true of time on our planet. East Africa is the cradle of our species: our primal fears, our hopes, our understanding of light and shadow, fire, rain, star maps, the quest for immortality. It was only six hundred thousand years ago that the common ancestors of every human who is not African waded across the narrows of the Red Sea to Arabia, and from there to every point on the planet. In this sense, we are all Africans now. But the chemosynthetic life forms swarming in the cracks of rock on the seafloor exceed the mass of all life on land. They are ancient. The archaea, for instance, without thought, almost without sensation, has evolved for perhaps 3.8 billion years. That kind of stability asks questions of our species. We are fragile by comparison as a species—miraculous, yes, but tottering.

*At one point, you write of the spy: "His mind was supple, the mind of a future head of intelligence, who believed the greatest service he could offer in the complicated present was to help people catch up emotionally with where they stood historically." Do you think it would be fair to say that this is also the greatest service that a writer can offer? Or, put differently, is this the service you seek to offer?*

I stand by that description for intelligence officers, at least the better ones, but I don't see that as a description of my writing. I'm interested in taking something familiar and showing how strange it is and how it sparkles. My first novel, "Giraffe," was about the strangeness of wild animals with whom we cohabit the world. With "Submergence," I have gone one step beyond. My next book, which is still notional, will take another step.

*There's a lot of nonfiction, or a lot of writing that carries a spirit of non-fictional inquiry—scientific data, arcane historical lore, literary and theological allusion—on nearly every page of the book, which makes it a very rich read. What is it that you value most that fiction allows you that reportorial writing does not?*

It's freedom to roam, to draw much longer loops of thought, and to use an adjective.

*No adjectives—the Economist writer speaks.*

My editor used to say you're allowed one adjective a piece. But obviously literature is a slow burn. While great journalism speaks essentially to the moment, literature has the long reach. It's a bit random what survives and what doesn't, but I think of Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons"—a mid-nineteenth-century novel from Russia, and it is still so incredibly relevant. So literature really allows for the big themes, and we should take them on. I find it a bit disappointing that so much contemporary novel writing doesn't. Think about what's happened in the past twenty years, since the end of the Cold War—the technological revolution, the doubling of the world population, the rise of China, the extinction of thousands of species. I'm not saying that literature should be a polemic. But if literary fiction is reduced to only middle-class families dealing only with middle-class angst, then it's really finished as a force for grappling with the world.

To me, the world is inherently mysterious, even like a fairy tale, sometimes a happy fairy tale, sometimes a very dark one. But that wonderment is what I'm after. Nonfiction may not be able to get at that cosmic unknowable and unknown aspect.

*You are, to borrow the title of one of my country's great pop songs, the son of a preacher man, and references to religious thought, and concrete explorations of the spiritual dimensions of the political and scientific dramas you tell, run through the book. Above all, you seem to be asking whether the human species is doomed to make itself extinct—or, put differently, whether we can survive.*

Yes, it's unfashionable, but I really do look up to some of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English religious men and metaphysical poets. A part of it is their use of the English language, but a lot is the power, immediacy, and humor with which they approached vital questions: Who am I? Where and to whom and to what am I beholden? What is my span? I especially like the Anglicans, who balanced the hereafter with a devotion to the here and now (a parish church in a damp village). But I think the exposure to death in Africa and the consequent intensity of life there—both maggotty and reanimating—is oddly reflective of conditions in early modern England. Of course, John Milton never had to consider the future of species and Isaac Newton never had to parse the data on climate change. We are living in a time that is easier but also graver, where the urgency lies not in saving your soul but in saving a diversity of life.

*Can you explain concretely how you see the connection between the story of one man in captivity in Somalia, and of the depletion of the planet, and particularly of the seas, by*

*human beings collectively?*

With the depletion of the seas, it is a case of out of sight out of mind. This needs a different conversation, but I'll just cite the destruction of sharks in the Western Indian Ocean as one example of how terrible the situation has become. Sharks are critical for the food pyramid in tropical coral reef systems and they are being fished out for their fins, which go for soup in China. It is beyond barbarous. So I can't answer your question exactly, except by reemphasizing that we need a clearer sense of what is our place on Earth.

"Submergence" then juxtaposes land with ocean and enlightenment with fanaticism. I felt impelled to write it in this way, but it is odd, I can see that. But sometimes life is even odder. It was the strangest moment for me when Osama bin Laden was killed and buried at sea. Everything came together in the abyss. I have often thought about it since, not just bin Laden's weighted corpse sinking down to the sea floor, but also the processes done on his body, the creatures, the crushing dark, and that's what I am talking about—there is another world in our world.



*Philip Gourevitch has been a regular contributor to The New Yorker since 1995 and a staff writer since 1997. [Read more »](#)*

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