

# In conversation with... Rutendo Tavengerwei

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**Hi Rutendo! First of all, I would like to congratulate you on the publication of your debut novel, *Hope is our Only Wing*. Can you please briefly tell us what it is about?**

A: *Hope is our Only Wing* is a story about a young girl trying to cope with the death of her father and a big move her family has just made to Zimbabwe, a country going through an economic and political crisis. While trying to adjust to a new life and at the same time understand the suspicious circumstances surrounding her father's death, she meets another girl, Tanyaradzwa, at boarding school who is going through her own issues and whose world is equally collapsing. Shamiso struggles to accept this new friendship with Tanyaradzwa out of fear of losing yet another person. It's a book about fight and hope, and the importance of not giving up.

**Did you have the plot entirely figured out when you started writing or did it develop before your eyes as the characters grew on the page and did something that you were not expecting?**

A: I think my writing process is to some extent quite random and almost chaotic. I had planned my plot, of course, but most of it changed as I wrote. There were several things at play. Since the story was based in Zimbabwe in 2008, the social-political situation of the country definitely inspired changes in the plot and characters. And at the same time, the new changes in the story started influencing the characterisation because with the events I picked for the plot, it determined what the characters were like because of how I wanted them to respond to those events. So, in short, it was a very jumbled-up process.

**This is your first published work of fiction. How did your book deal come about and how did you feel when you held the physical book in your hands for the first time?**

A: My book deal was a miracle actually. In 2016, while volunteering at a church in Southampton, I made friends with a lovely lady there, to whom I happened to mention that I had been writing a book for the past three months. She told me her daughter worked in publishing and might be willing to give me some pointers. I didn't even think anything would come out of it apart from great tips and writing advice. And when this lady's daughter replied to me after reading my manuscript, she told me she was an editor from Bonnier Zaffre and her company would like to publish my book. I remember being so confused and excited at the same time. If I remember correctly, she called me afterwards to tell me the news again.

The first copies actually arrived on my birthday so I was greatly thrilled about that of course. But the postman arrived just as I was heading out. So I quickly opened the box, hands trembling with excitement, grabbed a copy and shoved it in my bag, then ran to catch my tram. And as I sat in the tram, I brought the physical copy out and started reading it, not realising that I had tears in my eyes. I think the people in the tram must have thought it was a rather touching story I was reading, because a man sitting next to me asked if the book was really that good.

**If this novel could be turned into a film, who would you cast in the roles of Shamiso and Tanyaradzwa?**

A: Oh, this is a hard one. I always picture someone like Amandla Steinberg when I think of Tanyaradzwa, someone who can be soft and gentle. I think Keke Palmer would make a pretty feisty Shamiso, or South African actress Nomvelo Makhanya.

**Without giving too much away, can you tell us about a scene in the book that you love or that was particularly difficult to write?**

A: One of the scenes I absolutely loved writing is the end. I tried as much as I could to play around with words and let them bring sound and represent the instruments there, and the feel of the rain, and the hope in people. Music is always a big part of my writing process and I try and include it when I write so the reader can have a little taste of how I felt as I imagined it. So bringing it to the scene where hope was almost tangible for the characters was somewhat fulfilling for me.

**Is there anything that didn't make it into the final version of the book?**

A: There's a number of things that didn't make it into the final version of the book because they didn't quite work anymore. It's like that with editing, I find. Sometimes you think something works when you start writing it and then as the story progresses and continues to shape up, some scenes are better left out, and new ones even emerge. It's exactly as Shannon Hale put it, a first draft is like shovelling sand in a sandbox, to later build sandcastles out of. You don't always use all the sand you have to build a sandcastle.

**If you are already working on your next writing project, would you mind giving us a little anticipation of what we are to expect?**

A: I am very excited about my next book. I think it's a little more fast paced and dramatic than HOPE. It's also set in Zimbabwe, and this time, on a specific historic event. I'm afraid if I explain more, I might give it away but the only spoiler I'm willing to give is that it also has a message behind it.

**Due to the popularity of social networking websites, interacting with readers – be it via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc. – is becoming increasingly important. How do you cope with these new demands on authors and do you think that they somehow disrupt your writing schedule?**

A: I must admit that I'm not always good with social media because between writing, and my day job, my life is somewhat cluttered. But I am learning to engage more because I think it's important. Personally, I wrote this book trying to send a positive message to people, so if people want to express what they feel about the book, I think it's good to be there to engage where I can or at least try to.

**What one piece of advice would you give to aspiring writers?**

A: For the typical writer there will be some discouragement along the way, and at times even a few no(s), but don't give up. Any work that doesn't end up being published is not a waste of time because it is practise work. And if you're criticised, try and take what you can learn out of it, and not take criticism personally because that might discourage you from writing altogether. In the words of Winston Churchill, 'never give up! Never, never, never.'