

Interview with Namwali Serpell

Kendra [00:00:09] Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Autumn Privett. And this is *Reading Women*, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And today we're talking to Namwali Serpell, the author of *THE OLD DRIFT*, out now from Hogarth.

Autumn [00:00:24] I'm just gonna take a minute and just say "brackets, insert all the gushing in the world, end brackets."

Kendra [00:00:29] You know, you've been texting me about this book for about two weeks now, at minimum.

Autumn [00:00:35] Well, it's like a 600-page book. So every day that I read it, I would finish and immediately text you and say, "Why have you not started this yet?"

Kendra [00:00:45] And then you finished it, and then I was like, "No no. No spoilers yet. Yes, I've started it. I haven't finished it."

Autumn [00:00:51] Oh, it's been torture. But anyway, so we were really excited to get to talk to know Namwali about her novel *THE OLD DRIFT*. Namwali is a Zambian author who now lives in San Francisco, and she is a prolific writer. Her stories have won the Caine Prize for African Writing, and she's also was chosen as one of the Africa39, a Hay Festival project to identify the most promising African writers under 40. Her work has been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Tin House*, *The Believer*, *McSweeney's*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *L.A. Review Books*, *The Guardian*, and in six short story anthologies. So she is a masterful, masterful writer, and she's currently an associate professor of English at Berkeley University.

Kendra [00:01:47] And this is her first novel, *THE OLD DRIFT*. And it has been so well received. There was this rave review in *The New York Times* a few weeks ago, or probably, you know, while you're listening to this—a while ago, so we're so thrilled to have this opportunity to talk with her about her new book.

Autumn [00:02:03] So without further ado, here is our conversation with Namwali about *THE OLD DRIFT*.

Kendra [00:02:17] Well, Namwali, we're so excited to have you on the podcast. Welcome.

Namwali [00:02:21] Thank you for having me.

Autumn [00:02:23] When I first saw the cover of your book, and then when I got a copy of it, I was so excited to see how long it was. Because I love big books. Ever since I was a kid, I've just loved giant books. So it was a joy and delight to get to spend so much time with yours.

Namwali [00:02:42] Thank you so much. I feel similarly about immersing myself in a tome.

Kendra [00:02:48] I loved how you like leaned into the length. It wasn't like you were trying to hide it. You weren't trying to make it a page turner; you just leaned into it, and it was like, "This is what it is, and I'm gonna do this thing." And I really love *PACHINKO* and

BARSKINS. But ever since then, I can't remember enjoying a really long book like this, as much as I have THE OLD DRIFT. So we're just here for it.

Namwali [00:03:12] Thank you. I like the epic as a form. You know, I feel like my favorite books when I was in college tended toward like ANNA KARENINA and, you know, PARADISE LOST, these long books. And even in graduate school, we were forced to read Dickens's the longest books BLEAK HOUSE and DOMBEY AND SON. And I just loved it. It's one of my favorite things to do to just kind of be with a work for that long because you kind of get to linger.

Autumn [00:03:43] Oh I know. And by the time I was like 50 pages left, I was so depressed. I was like, "No! I don't want it to be over! But I want to know what happens." But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, for our listeners who haven't yet had the joy of reading THE OLD DRIFT, could you just describe it for them?

Namwali [00:04:02] So for a long time, I've been jokingly calling this novel, the Great Zambian novel you didn't know that you were waiting for. And it tells the story of my country from its earliest beginnings, a colonial settlement on the banks of the Zambezi River in the 19th century all the way to a near future Zambia. And it tells that story through three different families whose lives intersect at various points across the century and a half or so of the telling. And those three families are very multicultural. They come from England and Italy and India and also from different tribes in Zambia. They harm each other by accident. They fall in love by accident. They break each other's hearts by accident. The larger scale concept I wanted to explore is the question of accident, error, as a guiding principle for how evolution works but also for how our lives work, and as this kind of constant plague for mankind. We're constantly trying to fix our mistakes or fix our errors. But I was interested in seeing the ways in which error can be a generative process. It can cause things to come into being, horrible things but also sometimes beautiful things as well.

Kendra [00:05:28] And one of the things I really loved about your novel is its structure, and you know, we're huge structure nerds here on *Reading Women*. This book is structured in the different generations of families. We have the three different generations, and with each generation, you have the separate—the three different families, like a character from each of the families. And with all of these different characters, you know, you see this beautiful family tree in the front the book, which always gets me very excited about a book I'm about to read. But with so many different characters and their different lives, and then eventually, you know, they intersect. How did you keep all of these characters and their lives straight as you were writing the novel?

Namwali [00:06:07] It's hard to look back over such a long process because this novel began as a, kind of, little baby piece of writing when I was in college when I was about 20 years old in the year 2000, I think. And that fall is when I took my first creative writing class and started writing about three of the members of one of the families. So at that stage, I knew who those three characters were. That was Matha, one of the grandmothers. Sylvia, one of the mothers and Jacob, one of the children. And I knew that all three of them had a different relationship to the genre. So I knew that Matha was a magical-realist character, and that Sylvia was more of a social-realist character, and that Jacob was interested in technology and so was a kind of sci-fi genre. But I didn't have much beyond that. And then other characters came into being over time. Every year or so, for over the course of about five years, different members of different families would emerge for me and I think that the phrase "a cycle of unwitting retribution" came to me pretty early. I knew that I wanted each

family to affect the others in this kind of oblique way. So the first one affects the second one, which affects the third one, which affects the first one. So it's not like the Montagues and the Capulets. I knew that part of the reason that there's three is because I wanted this to be, again, this more oblique kind of slant relationship between the families. By the year 2005, I had the full set of characters kind of mapped out. And sometimes their names changed, but who they were in terms of their person, in terms of their genre, in terms of their relationship to the other characters was pretty much, kind of, came to me fully formed. So when you've been with characters from the year 2000 until the year 2015, which is when I turned back to to finish the novel, it's not like names on a page that you're trying to keep separate. They feel like different people; they feel like people you know. So I didn't have to do very much to keep them separate in my mind. But I did try as much as I could to give the reader a sense of their difference from each other. I think the the hardest characters to keep apart are the two main male characters, actually, Jacob and Joseph. And part of that is their name, but I always knew that they were going to be doubles of each other, sort of brotherly, sort of in this kind of Cain and Abel like relationship. And so, I don't mind that they were not so distinguishable from each other, but the other characters, just yeah, they all have their own spirit. So much so that when I would try to get them to do something, sometimes they'd be like, "That's not what I would do."

Autumn [00:09:25] My heart's like pitter-pattering because I'm so excited just to hear you talk about these structures and stuff. But one of the characters, and I don't want to give away who or what it is, but one of the characters—I guess you can call it a character in the book that is my favorite is the italicized narrator between each of the sections. And I love that you already mentioned an epic because I was like, "Ooo! We have a Greek chorus." How did you come about to deciding that this book needed that kind of a Greek chorus to round out its characters?

Namwali [00:10:02] So the voice of that swarm narrator—and we can we can give away that it's a swarm of mosquitoes; I've spoken about it in too many contexts, and I think it's come up in too many reviews to share a secret at this point—that voice came to me very early on, I think, around 2002, after I graduated, maybe 2001. And it belonged initially to the final descendant, who is the son born of Naila, who was one of the three children of uncertain paternity. And at some point, I realized that this, you know, this young man who would be telling the story of his family history, that he would exist in the future. And I also realized that I didn't myself know who his father was and I didn't want to know. And so figuring out who he was as a person proved a task that I didn't feel quite up to, especially because his voice was so grandiose, and it didn't really seem like a human voice. And then at some point after I had returned to writing the book and was trying to figure out a way to keep that voice and also to use it as a way to, kind of, pull lessons or some kind of threads out of this very long and rich narrative, or what I hoped would be a long and rich narrative, and I needed some container for this voice. And I'm not sure, you know, people to ask me this, and I know where I was when the idea came to me and I know which elements all clicked together. I knew that the interest in flying things and the interest in blood, the interest in viruses and disease—all of that, and just, you know, the old drift itself, the place as the swamp. I knew that all those things would come together in this figure of the swarm of mosquitoes, but I can't exactly put my finger on what triggered that idea. I'm glad it came to me, though, because I had a lot of fun writing those sections of the novel.

Autumn [00:12:19] They're like some of my favorite sections. They're just so perfect.

Kendra [00:12:23] On the audio book, it has its own narrator.

Namwali [00:12:25] Yes.

Kendra [00:12:25] And I absolutely adored that because it definitely like took you out of the previous section, and it gave you this interlude that you could hear, and I think that was just so effective for an audiobook. I really enjoyed it.

Namwali [00:12:44] Yeah, I was very excited about the different voices and even getting a different actor to voice the first chapter, which is the only chapter in the first person because it's derived from an autobiography from a historical figure. And so we have three actors for the audiobook, which is kind of fun. And for the mosquito sections, there was a while there where we were talking about, like, who we should audition for it. And I was like, "Well, it has to be a man because swarms of mosquitoes are male, and this is one of many moments in the production of this book where my very nerdy attachment to these specific entomological facts of mosquitoes has gotten in the way.

Namwali [00:13:30] I was really pleased by the fact that Kobna Holdbrook-Smith has this buzz underneath his voice kind of naturally. It was just the perfect touch.

Autumn [00:13:39] We've talked a little bit already about the history element of this book, and I was really just mesmerized, especially as the book started, because I felt like I was reading a really old book, which was really kind of special to start it out. But as I was reading, I was literally stopped in my tracks by this one quote referring to Ronald, who is the spouse of Agnes, one of the grandmothers in the family tree. And the quote says that Ronald had learned that "history" was a word the English used for the record of every time a white man encountered something he had never seen and promptly claimed it as his own, often renaming it for good measure. And that floored me because I realize how I was taught, like, having been educated in the West, you get a certain idea of a country and its people. And I thought that was just such a wonderful way to frame that. Could you talk a little bit about this quote and the power of who gets to tell history and how that fits into the narrative of your story?

Namwali [00:14:54] Yeah. So there's a couple of different ways to answer that question. So one is that the novel begins with the story of David Livingstone, told by the mosquitoes swarm narrators as a way of suggesting just how arbitrary, historically, colonial settlement actually was. So Livingstone was searching for the source of the Nile, and he stumbled on one of the great natural wonders of the world, this giant waterfall. And he renamed it, "Victoria Falls," which is what most people still know it as. But the people around him told him that the real name of it, in that part of the world, was Mosi-oa-Tunya, which means, "the smoke that thunders," which is just so much more evocative because you can actually—you can hear and you can see the mist rising from the falls from miles away. So it's this very evocative, I think, word that's just—and it also has that almost onomatopoeic—you know, Mosi-oa-Tunya, and you can hear the thunder. And Livingstone was, you know, it was unlike him to rename a piece of nature after anything. But this is the most dramatic and, I think, surprising and awe-inspiring thing he had encountered on his journeys. And so, I think, you know, there's some forgiveness of Livingstone in Zambia because he had some very, you know, progressive qualities. He advocated against the slave trade when others were actively practicing slavery. He took care of people; he broke their chains with his very hands sometimes; he freed people from slavery; he educated people. So there's this kind of ambivalence at home. You know, sometimes we call it Mosi-oa-Tunya; sometimes we call it Victoria Falls. And I wanted to capture that ambivalence, and that's why Ronald, who is this, you know, Zambian student who is studying engineering in England, and he's thinking that sentence about history being, you know,

every time a white man "discovers" something and renames it—when he's thinking about how to explain to his white bride, his fiancée, the history of this strange colonial home manor that he grew up in in the northern part of Zambia. And he thinks, "Well, she's British. From what I've seen, this is what the British think history is. So this is how I must translate it to her." And in the paragraph that follows, I sort of speak in a mode of negation. I say what he didn't tell her was the story of the Bemba, the migration that brought them to that lake in the first place. Right? So he knows it; he knows both. Right? He knows both histories, and it's a choice of which one he's going to tell. He's a conservative figure, of course. His aim is to seduce his young bride, not to sort of argue politically against her. He's quite an assimilationist, in his own right. So you know, I wanted to capture that ambivalence that exists at home. But I also wanted to capture my own journey in writing about my country, which is that the sources that I use to uncover the histories of Zambia are largely written by the West. And you know, one figure that plays a big part in the novel is Edward Makuka Nkoloso, who started a Zambian space program. And I learned about him through articles published in small American newspapers that had picked up the Associated Press wire stories about him. And then I went home, and I interviewed people, and I looked in the archives. And so again, I got these two histories, right? And even in the archives I had his letters. He wrote a letter to the queen from prison. He wrote letters to members of his political party in Bemba. And then I also had the British administrators, who kept very accurate records, or at least, very thorough records. And so you have these competing histories even in what ought to be the kind of original source, right, the archive. So to me, there's just this constant sense of ambivalence because you're reading your own history through the words and the claims of the people who colonized it. And so, you know, I think that sentence was capturing not just Ronald's own, kind of, savvy understanding of how to speak to the British, but my own frustration that this was what history kept saying to me as I was doing research for the novel.

Kendra [00:20:01] I really appreciate the attention, in particular, in that section between the idea of the West and "go to Zambia" and the founding of Zambia and different things, and the tension between those two things. It made me think a lot about how our perception in the West, our perception of different elements and fiction as well. And so recently, Wayétu Moore published a novel called SHE WOULD BE KING. And she said in her interviews that people in the West, when she was on book tour, are very quick to label the fantastical elements in her novel as magical realism because that is their understanding. But you know back in Liberia, when she's on book tour, her readers just, you know, accept those fantastical elements as just part of the story because it's part of their own culture of storytelling. Is that something that you have experienced and what is your, I guess, take on the fantastical elements and your own culture in the novel that you've written?

Namwali [00:20:56] I mean, I have so far received two reviews of the novel in the Zambian press, and I've been in touch with people at home. I've met some Zambian readers on the road. They all seem much more interested in the contemporary and future genres that I work in. So the social realist part of the novel and the sci-fi part of the novel. And so I actually am not sure what they make of the magical realist elements. What I know, though, is that I wanted purposefully to, you know, emphasize the magical realist elements in the two non-Black African characters. So Sibilla and Agnes have these magical elements. Matha does as well, but in all three cases, I'm sort of subverting expectations about what it means to have these magical qualities. So you know Matha Mwamba cries all the time. She gets seen as kind of a witch, that she's got this kind of Mama Africa, who's crying for her, you know, for her children. The various women in the compound where she lives join together, and they start crying as well, and they call themselves "The Weepers," and it becomes this kind of piece of sisterly solidarity between each other. But at the end of the

day, Matha Mwamba is not a miracle. And she's not crying for the troubles of Africa; she's crying because a guy broke her heart. We don't think that people outside of the western paradigm have lives like we do. It's like, you know, she's living in a compound; she must be concerned about what she's going to eat or about whether her children have a disease. It's like, Well no, she's actually just heartbroken because love and heartbreak are the daily realities of people everywhere. It doesn't matter. So I was trying to kind of subvert some of the associations of the magical real with Zambian tradition. So it'll be interesting to me to see how people react at home. I think the figures that I invent, you know, this woman who's covered in hair, this woman who cries all the time, this woman who goes blind but seems to have eyes that light up all over her body in certain lights—those are not in any way tied to Zambian mythology. Those are just sheer, kind of, inventions from off the top of my head. I actually think that they are magical realist elements rather than say the kinds of animal stories or mythologies that we have in Zambian culture, which appear in other parts of the story. But these are these are actually genre tropes from a different tradition.

Kendra [00:23:49] So you've combined a lot of different things in this novel just like you've combined these different families and their heritages together throughout the story. That's really fascinating.

Namwali [00:24:00] Yeah for sure. I mean, I think that's like maybe natural to me because I'm like a combination person in myself. You know I'm Zambian; I'm now an American citizen. I'm mixed race. You know, I grew up in many different places. And I also just really love lots and lots of different kinds of art. So, you know, the multiculturalism and the multi-genre aspects of my novel I see as linked together. And a lot of it is just, like, this kind of wholehearted embrace of lots of things. Which, I think, Wayétu, who I met actually here in San Francisco has a similar open-armed embrace for different kinds of genre aesthetics. You know, I loved her book.

Autumn [00:24:53] I want to kind of circle back to something you mentioned way back in the introduction when you were, kind of, talking about the book, and that's this idea of accidents. And as you're talking about how you mix these genres and traditions and all these things together, I don't think I actually thought about accidents in relation to how this story wove together, but I did find myself thinking as I was reading like I do wonder sometimes like how you know if I've crossed paths with someone multiple times or you know when I meet someone and we were at the same place like 10 years ago or something. It's always kind of startling to me but could you talk a little bit more about accidents and how these families are kind of tied together by these very almost everyday kind of occurrences that happen to them?

Namwali [00:25:46] Yeah. So the novel begins in this settlement that was called, "the old drift." So a drift is the narrowest and stillest part of a river where you can drift things across. And of course any place where you have crossings or travel, there's going to be an outpost. People are going to stay; they're going to make money from the transport system. And so this little outpost, called the Old Drift, kind of mushroomed into a settlement of a couple of hundred people by the turn of the 20th century, and it was people from all over. So they're not just the many tribes in that area. So the Tonga, the Laya, the Bemba, some of whom were being recruited to work in the mines; others of whom were being recruited to work on the Cape to Cairo railway that was being built; a bridge that was built across one of the gorges near Victoria Falls initially had the rail line going across it. But you also had people from Germany and people from Hawaii and people from India and England and Italy. And you know, I discovered this from going to the graveyard of the Old Drift, the cemetery which is still there. And there are these, kind of, tumbled down tombstones with

these European names of people who died there because it was also you know jokingly called Dead Rock. Everyone was there, kind of swarming around this place, but they all died of malaria. And so everyone, kind of, was in a fever. And it was just this very, to me, interesting small-scale version of what it seems, to me, colonialism was as such. Which was kind of, like, arbitrary collision of people—some of whom were really just trying to make their fortunes in Africa because they couldn't make them back home. And one of the figures was this photographer Percy Clark, who wrote a memoir called THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN OLD DRIFTER. And in it he mentioned two other figures. One was an Italian hotelier named Pietro Gavuzzi and a Tonga bus boy named Galupe. And he tells a story of, you know, accidentally, supposedly, accidentally shooting this Tonga bus boy. And he blames him for being, you know, not completely with it. And so I sort of tried to trace back, like, how could this person actually have ended up having this drift quality that would lead to them actually getting shot by yet another drift man. And basically Percy, feverish because he has malaria yet again, accidentally snatches off a patch of hair from the scalp of Pietro Gavuzzi. And this leads to Pietro's wife Ada, who was a British woman, leaving her daughter abandoned. And her daughter reaches out and hits and Galupe and knocks him over, and that's what leads him to not be fully aware of his surroundings and be shot by Percy later on in that chapter. So I think of it as a kind of butterfly effect; this little collision between these three characters that kind of opens up to this larger scale of, again, relationships between these three families. And you know, I of course would like to think of it as a mosquito effect. You know, something so small as the mosquito that bit Percy that caused him to have malaria, that gave him fever, would yield all of this consequence from real people's lives—because this is the kind of thing that I would see in in the history books. A chief mistaking the royal charter brought to him by a company—by the British South Africa company—as a royal charter from the queen. So thinking that this businessman who's saying, "Can I buy your land?" Thinking that it's an emissary from the queen and being like, "Okay, you can buy my land; you've got the queen behind you." But that's just a misunderstanding of the word "royal." Or, you know, the Italian king drawing part of the boundary of what would become my country because the Portuguese and the British couldn't decide. And so the Italian king just took a pen and drew a right angle. You know, this is these random things that have such big consequences that spill over time. So you know, I start with that one accident, and then I tried as much as I could to create a plausible set of circumstances and encounters that would pull these three families into circulation around each other until it revolves down and kind of spirals down to a love triangle, which is perhaps the most kind of intimate relationship you can have with two other people. And yeah, I mean, I think mapping those accidents across the novel—like, it's almost like a domino effect. I would write up these things. Like, she's only there because so-and-so did that, and so-and-so did that because the other person in the other family did that. You know, actually mapping it out, you can you could make a full domino effect of the whole novel, which one hopes that the reader sort of picks up on it subtly just so that things feel plausible. It was one of the most challenging but also exciting kind of technical exercises I've ever set for myself.

Autumn [00:31:24] As a reader, it was incredibly exciting.

Namwali [00:31:27] Thank you.

Autumn [00:31:29] It is almost like a scavenger hunt or something. Like when I came across a clue, I'd be like, Oh! I know why this is important!"

Namwali [00:31:38] Yeah.

Autumn [00:31:38] Oh my goodness, it was so much fun.

Kendra [00:31:42] For my next question, I do want avoid spoilers, so I'm just going to talk about the first part of the novel for this question. But in the beginning of the novel, two of the women in the grandmother section experienced bodily difference in one case and being differently abled—one of the women is blind—in the other case. And you know, as someone with a disabling chronic disease, I'm always looking out for representation of people who are differently abled or may have bodily difference for various reasons. And you know, we don't often see characters who are fully fleshed out and fully human with those types of conditions in novels. Was that something that you wanted to consciously tackle in the novel? Or was it just something that unfolded as you wrote the story?

Namwali [00:32:31] I think when Agnes came to me, she came to me in, you know, telling this kind of fairy tale story to some some unnamed listener about how she fell in love. And I think probably the seed of it was the notion of the term colorblind, and I was trying to ironize that, and then, you know, as I wrote her and did research on the way blindness would manifest for her, I spoke at length and sent copies of her chapters to my colleague Georgina Kleege, who is blind. As I was doing that, her reality—her, you know, as you say, the idea that she's just a fully fleshed person, that became inevitable. I think people sometimes treat disability as a metaphor. And what I found was that I was unable to treat it as a metaphor for longer than a paragraph. As soon as I put her own story or the figure of her blindness into her own mouth, she was a person speaking. And then figuring out things like what would it be like for her to try to use a sanitary pad? What would it be like for her to relearn how to play tennis, which was this thing that completely absorbed her and her adolescent years? What would it be like to be, kind of, actually a bit of a shallow person and then to undergo something so difficult and as a young person with parents who really have absolutely no resources psychologically to help her through it? And what would she be looking for, you know, what would what would lead to her being with this man then and following him across the world? And, you know, eventually I thought, you know, it was that she was looking for a home. She was looking for some kind of connection with people so that she wouldn't feel so lonely. Because I think what it does for her at the very start is it really isolates her, and she isolates herself in fury to a certain extent. And it's not that her blindness was incidental but rather that it moved from being a figure. As I said, you know, when I started writing her—I mean I must have been 22 when I wrote her first paragraph—to being just a really important part of her story, and talking to Georgina, you know, getting her to kind of look through things. Was anything unrealistic? Was anything . . . was I fetishizing this character in any way? And Georgina said what you just said, which was that it is, it's actually so rare for a blind person to just be written as a person, that she was really, yeah, I mean, she gave me some tips, like, you know, that Agnes would probably use a tape recorder instead of a Braille machine in the 1970s—that sort of thing, you know, these kind of historical details. But when it came down to representing her phenomenological experience, just the fact of her being a character for three chapters in the middle of the novel and then later on as a as a mother and a grandmother, Georgina was like, that in itself is shockingly rare. So it's not like I got Georgina's blessing, but it was very interesting to me to talk to her, and to have that conversation because I had not realized how rare that was.

Kendra [00:36:14] And there's something about also the first chapter of the woman with all the hair, and you know that is, there is an actual condition.

Namwali [00:36:22] Yeah, hirsutism.

Kendra [00:36:24] There are moments when she's trying to "pass as normal." I mean, using lots of air quotes here, but she has to shave her face, and you can tell—just the way, you know, it's very subtle the way that you describe it, but like she's very unhappy doing that. Like you can tell she doesn't feel ashamed of her hair per say, like it's part of who she is. And so the fact that she's doing that, it just makes her feel like she's not herself. And I thought that was so well put because a lot of times when we discuss these types of things, people are always trying to cure you or cure the thing that you have, and that's not how she viewed her hair. It was just part of who she was as a person.

Namwali [00:37:05] Yeah, actually, there are scenes of all three women, you know, when Matha is crying all the time—there are scenes of all three women confronting people who want to cure them. You know, Sibilla with her lover's older brother, who has written to a German doctor to find out what her condition is called and how it might be treated. You know, with Agnes, Mr. Sakala, the cook, is always saying that his wife is praying for her sight to return. And you know, with Matha, there's people who are who are constantly trying to cheer her up, even though she's, you know, she's cried herself into this, basically, into into blindness. And you know, all three of them refuse that, which I hadn't realized it until you just said it. But they all three of them are like, "Yeah, no, I don't want that."

Autumn [00:37:57] So we've just barely skimmed the surface of your wonderful novel and talking about it. I really just kind of want to hang up the phone and go started all over again. Before we let you go, we always like to ask authors we have on the podcast, who are some of the women authors from Africa or writing from the African diaspora that you would recommend for our listeners?

Namwali [00:38:24] That's a great question. So Bessie Head, who is Botswanan of origin but lived in South Africa. I would recommend Nwal El-Saadawi, who's an Egyptian writer. They are currently nominated for the women's prize, so I think I can say this, although I don't know if they identify as a woman writer. But one of the best contemporary writers from Africa right now is Akwaeki Emezi. NoViolet Bulawayo's *WE NEED NEW NAMES* is a wonderful contemporary novel. Tsitsi Dangarembga, Zimbabwean novelist, her *NERVOUS CONDITIONS* was really formative for me as a young woman. And I read it when I was a teenager, and it just really really resonated. Oh, and Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *KINTU*, which is pronounced, chin too, is a Ugandan epic. And if you guys like a big book, it is an incredibly epic description of Uganda, and it's yeah, it's just, I think it's one of the best novels I've read in the last two years. So I would very very highly recommend that one. I wrote a review of it, actually, in the *New York Review of Books*. So once you've finished it, you can see my spoilers.

Autumn [00:39:54] Awesome. I'm adding it to my Goodreads list right now. And we will link all those in our show notes, so our listeners can find them easily as well. But thank you so much for coming onto the podcast and talking to us about *THE OLD DRIFT*. We loved getting to chat to you about it, and we loved reading it as well.

Namwali [00:40:14] Thank you so much. Thanks for having me and for your great questions.

Kendra [00:40:21] We'd like to thank. Namwali Serpell for talking to us about her novel *THE OLD DRIFT*, which is out now from Hogarth. You can find Namwali on her website namweliserpell.com as well as [@namwalien](https://twitter.com/namwalien) on Twitter. And of course, all of Namwali's information will be linked in our show notes.

Autumn [00:40:38] And we'd also like to say a special thank you to our patrons whose support makes this podcast possible. You can find out more about how to become a patron by visiting our website readingwomenpodcast.com. You can also find us on Instagram and on Twitter @theReadingWomen. You can find Kendra @kdwinchester and me @autumnprivett. Thank you all so much for listening to *Reading Women*, and we will talk to you soon.