

Hannah Pool: For my father I am always Azieb Asrat.



By: Tsigye Hailemichael

Hannah Pool is, in her own words, British-Eritrean, Eritrean-British. She was born in Eritrea in 1974 and was adopted at the age of six months by a British scholar who lived and worked in the Sudan. She was raised in Manchester, England, believing that both her parents had died shortly after her birth. She now lives in London where she works as a columnist for The Guardian. At the age of nineteen, she received a letter from her brother informing her that her father was alive and she had a sister and several brothers who lived in Eritrea. It took ten years for her to make the decision to meet with her birth family. She then embarked on a journey which took her back to her origins and which she recounts in her book titled *My Fathers' Daughter* (Hamish Hamilton, 2005.)

Hannah, who came to Eritrea last summer to visit her family, gave a reading from her book at the British Council in Asmara on the 25th of August 2008. The next day she gave an interview to a group of journalists and following is a selection of questions and answers from that session.

Q: When did you first think of writing a book about your story?

H.P: I always knew I was going to write my story. I write; that is what I

do. I am an author. For the last ten years I have worked as a journalist. I did not know if it was going

to be a book or an article for a newspaper or magazine, but I knew I was going to write it. When I got an offer for a book deal, I thought it was great.

Q: What were your reactions when you finished writing the book?

H.P: Writing was not difficult. In fact, writing was a pleasurable experience for me. What was difficult was to engage in the actual journey, going on the trip, going through the feelings and experiences. That was difficult, not the writing itself.

Q: What kind of reactions did you get from it?

H.P: I had great reactions, good reviews. I received emails from Eritreans all over the world and also from people with stories similar to mine and I realized my story was also theirs.

Q: How did you feel meeting others like you?

H.P: It was great to meet other Eritreans. I did not know many of them when I was growing up. It is a powerful experience to meet Eritreans and also to meet my relatives all over the world. Meeting people with similar stories make you feel better. I was also interested in the stories of women because they may not have the same chances to be heard.

Q: What has been the most touching event so far?

H.P: Well I hope it is yet to come! My book is a memoir about my journey so far. But indeed, meeting my family, meeting my father here in Asmara and I hope there will be more touching events like that.

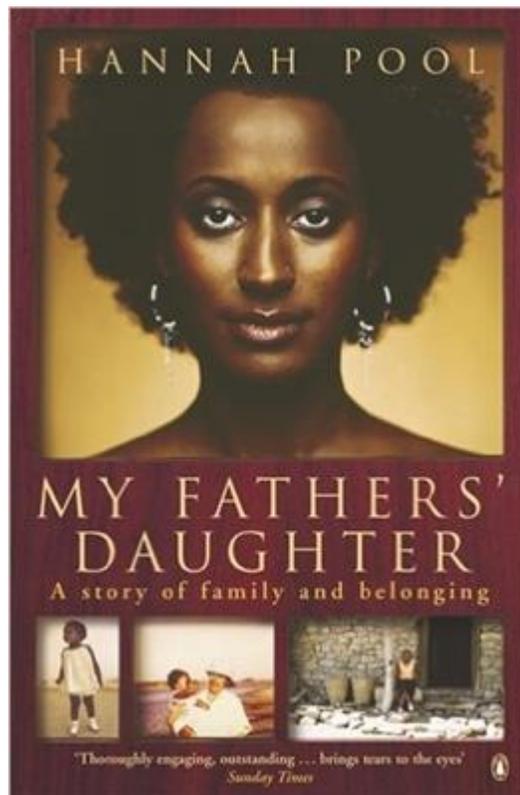
Q: What is it like to be adopted?

H.P: This is a very difficult question with many complicated issues. I can only tell of my own experience. There are many issues involved: issues about identity, especially if you have white parents. There are issues of heritage, security, about knowing who your are. When people want to adopt a child, at the beginning it is a beautiful thing, but it is a beautiful

thing that comes out a tragedy. Adoption must not be seen as the first solution. We must find ways to think of other solutions before adoption.

Q: When did you come to realize you were adopted?

H.P: In my case it was obvious from the beginning. When I was a child, people checked if my adoptive father had not kidnapped me. I always knew I was adopted. My father is a friend of Eritrea and had lots of connections with the Eritrean community.



Q: Did your adoptive parents tell you about how you were adopted?

H.P: My dad was always very open. I always knew. At the time, my adoptive parents lived in Sudan (my dad is British and his wife was American.) At one time my adoptive mother was invited to visit the Camboni Mission in Asmara and they left with me. My adoptive mother died while we still lived in the Sudan. Then I was sent to Norway and it is only several years later that I went to England to live with my adoptive father.

Q: Were there many challenges growing up black in a white community?

H.P: Yes, very much so. There was a lot of racism. When you are a kid, people call you names. They shout at you: “famine victim” or make monkey noises when you go by. Then when I was older, I also experienced what it felt like for people not wanting to be friends with you because you are black.

Q: How did you react then?

H.P: Most black kids could understand me, but if you lived in a white family, then you would feel isolated. You did not have anyone to talk with. But also, in my case, even black children could be mean because I was like a white person: I spoke like a white person. You would feel very isolated. Basically you are on your own.

Q: How did you go about it when you wanted to trace your family back?

H.P: I spent lots of time not wanting to trace my family back. It is a very emotional issue but also it is very difficult. One takes great risks when taking the decision to trace one’s family back. One should be very careful and very thoughtful before taking any decisions. It is like opening a can of worms. Once it is open you don’t know what is going to happen. Also you are afraid. You are afraid of being rejected by both families. You are afraid your adoptive family feels resentful towards you. In fact, I felt as if I was betraying them. And my birth family, I was just afraid they would reject me and I would find myself isolated again.

Q: What do you think you would have been if you had not been adopted?

H.P: I would have been a regular Eritrean girl, maybe an Asmarina.

Q: What was the “eureka” moment for you in this journey?

H.P: Making the decision that I was going to do it: to go and find them. But it was not easy to do it and I had to do it step by step. I began by just booking my flight as if I was going anywhere in the world.

Q: What was your reaction when you got the letter from your birth

family?

H.P: My dad received the letter and he waited for me to come back home for the holidays to tell me about it. It took me ten years before I made the decision to go and meet them.

Q: When it came time to actually meet with your birth family, how did you feel?

H.P: I was just panicked. When I was about to meet them, I realized I was just ten minutes away from meeting them and it was just pure panic. I was wondering if they would realize how panicked I was.

Q: Do you feel different from other adopted children?

H.P: Everyone is unique. In some ways my case may be extreme but we are all unique although we probably all feel lonely and isolated. I could not hide my adoption and there are many places where adoption is kept a secret and some people keep it a secret for a very long time. After I wrote my book lots of people came to me to tell me they were adopted and that no one knew.

Q: How long did it take you to write your book?

H.P: When I decided to write the book, I changed my work schedule so that I could have one day a week to work on it. And when my deadline was getting closer, I worked on it on the weekends, then in the mornings, but it took at least a year. Just drawing the genealogical tree that is at the end of the book took me quite some time!

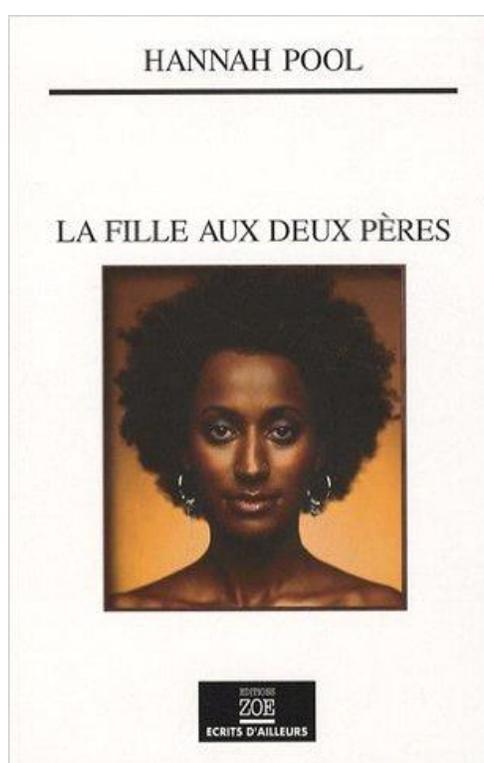
Q: What was the writing process like for you?

H.P: Most of the book comes out of the notes that I took while going through this journey. I did not really keep a diary but when I came to Eritrea for the first time, I came on my own. I had a tape recorder to talk to and a notebook that was like my friend. I mixed the diary and the recording otherwise I would simply forget details.

Q: What was your first impression of Asmara?

H.P: It is the people, the kindness and friendliness of people being so helpful that was striking to me. In England it is different: you don't easily start conversations in cafes for example. When I went to the

orphanage from where I was adopted, in 5 minutes they found my adoption files from 30 years ago and that was my first encounter with bureaucracy in Eritrea. Asmara is beautiful; the architecture is amazing, but that is superficial compared to the warm welcome I received. And that is what touched me, how pleased people were to welcome me. When I was growing up, I was used to very negative images of Africa. I was never shown the side of Africa that I saw when I came here. It is fun here. It is not at all what you think of when you grow up in the West. I was so surprised to find that Asmara was a cafe society, for example. It simply blew my mind.



Q: Do you have stories to publish in England about Eritrea?

H.P: Not for the moment, I know so little about Eritrea although my dad has written about it professionally. So far, I can only write about my family and myself. In my work as a journalist, I write about lifestyle, fashion, and celebrities in England. I majored in sociology and for the last ten years I have worked as a journalist for The Guardian and I also freelance in women's magazines.

Q: What interests you in Eritrea?

H.P: The social aspect. What interests me is to give an image about artists here, filmmakers, for example.

Q: Do you feel it was brave of you to put your feelings into words?

H.P: Writing helped me order my thoughts and feelings when I met my family. Being adopted, being put in an orphanage, all these issues... the book allowed me to stop and think about these things. The book helped me but it was not my therapy. It was a way of having a voice. It was like writing a letter to my dad and my (biological) father. Writing allows you to clearly express yourself without being interrupted. I was lucky to have that. The book is there. It is a permanent reminder, and for me it helped me think about things very clearly.

Q: When the book was finished did you ask people to review it?

H.P: I showed the book to my dad and to an Eritrean friend and I asked them to tell me if there was anything they did not like. My dad said he was proud of me and had just one or two minor corrections with spelling of names or so. Well, yes I was worried about people's reactions but it is a small worry compared to meeting your birth father after 30 years. And I learned that if you meet your fears then you feel you can do anything.

Q: Are you working on another book now?

H.P: Yes, it is fiction this time but I can't talk about it.

Q: How do you feel about your own identity? Do you feel you are British, do you feel you are Eritrean?

H.P: I went through different phases. Once I heard a song which mentioned Eritrea and I was so excited. I said: "This is me: I am Eritrean." But also I never felt as British as when I met my family for the first time. Being a returnee has its own flag: You may not fit here or there but there is another identity. I came to understand that there are others like me and now I am comfortable with that.

Q: You made a name for yourself as Hannah Pool. How about your birth name, have you thought of taking your biological father's name now that you have met with him?

H.P: I did not change my name. Names are powerful symbols. Often,

adoptive parents choose a name for the child they have adopted. And if they do not keep your original name somehow, then it means they take that away from you. My parents kept my original name, Azieb, as a middle name so that I could always use it if I wanted to. Hannah, the name they gave me, works in almost every country. I actually went through a phase where I wanted to be Azieb; I thought it was very exotic. It was part of acknowledging my black identity in England. And here in Eritrea, I love that Azieb is just a common name. But I have always been Hannah Pool and for the last ten years, I have worked as a journalist as Hannah Pool. Now I feel secure enough to not have to change my name. It is more important for me to learn Tigrinya, to know my father, to know more about Eritrea.

Q: Do you think your birth father would like you to take your original name back?

H.P: For him I am and will always be Azieb Asrat.

Thank you Hannah-Azieb for this interview.

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