

Making Tracks

SUSHEILA NASTA IN CONVERSATION WITH JONATHAN BARKER

Twenty years in the life of a literary or arts journal is a significant milestone. To found a journal calls for a special kind of dedication; to keep one going for twenty years calls for a type of commitment given to only a very few. I first met Susheila Nasta in 1987 when we were both judges for the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. When I moved from the Arts Council to the British Council I found Wasafiri a valuable informal partner publishing many of the same new generation writers we toured overseas. Over the past twenty years Wasafiri has played a substantial part in reconfiguring and extending the canon for both the general and academic reader of literature. I last interviewed Susheila Nasta for Literature Matters (a British Council publication) over ten years ago, so I was keen to talk to her again and take stock in Wasafiri's anniversary year of how she thought the literary map both in Britain and elsewhere had changed over the years of her editorship.

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Jonathan Barker Susheila, this year *Wasafiri* is twenty years old and is celebrating its birthday with a national and international literary tour, a special issue and a book of interviews, *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk* (Routledge, 2004). You founded the magazine, I believe, in 1984. That is a long time in the life of an arts magazine and it also covers a formative period in literary and cultural history. What does the name *Wasafiri* mean?

Susheila Nasta Well, many people have asked me that; in fact when we first chose this name for the magazine there was some scepticism about whether it would be the kind of name people would ever remember. In fact 'wasafiri' derives from Kiswahili (and is itself a hybrid of the Arabic word 'safari') suggesting the



Susheila Nasta

idea of travel. This name was chosen because many of those who created the literatures in which we were particularly interested – whatever their cultural origins, whether African, Caribbean, South Asian, Black-British or of other diasporic mixed backgrounds – have all in some sense been cultural travellers either through migration, transportation or else in the more metaphorical sense of seeking an imagined cultural 'home'. Many of these writers have always negotiated questions of cultural difference and made important geographical and literary

crossings, often straddling several traditions. We thought it important too to invest a non-English word with these kinds of meanings and to suggest a movement in process, a journey.

In a sense we were 'naming' for ourselves (long before the literary theorists really got on to it) a cultural phenomenon that has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary writing: the notion of migration and cross-culturalism. By travelling across these different worlds, many writers, whether within or outside Britain, have forged important links and connections which have enriched and diversified

contemporary world writing. Today many of these writers are household names. I am thinking of people such as Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal, Zadie Smith and so on, many of whom have won major literary

awards. But this was not such a common phenomenon in the early 1980s when *Wasafiri* first began. Yes, *Midnight's Children* won the Booker in 1981 and people were aware of course of figures such as V S Naipaul or Derek Walcott, but there were many others, both young and of an earlier generation, whom people were not conscious of and who are now better known as major international figures. There are many reasons for this and I am not trying to suggest for one moment that *Wasafiri* was alone in giving serious literary space to their voices. However, one thing that *Wasafiri* did do from the outset was to always insist that such writers should be read alongside and as a part of the canonical mainstream, as key players in other words in making important interventions into the traditional literary scene.

JB Can you tell me something, then, about the context in the 1980s when *Wasafiri* was first founded? What were its aims and what prompted you to start it?

SN It seems incredible to me that the magazine is indeed twenty years old and that we are still going strong. We get more copy now from all over the world and books for review than ever before so something must be happening. Obviously we have had to change with the times and without being too modest I would suggest we have also been instrumental in effecting some change in how writing from 'elsewhere' or by 'other cultures', as it is sometimes inaccurately described in this country, has begun to be perceived. When *Wasafiri* was first set up in 1984 we aimed to create a literary, cultural and pedagogic forum to enable cross-cultural communication between a diverse community of writers, critics, educationalists and publishers interested in African, Caribbean and South Asian writing. One of its fundamental concerns at that time was to raise the profile of these literatures in universities, schools and amongst government bodies involved with creating the National Curriculum. It was initially published by ATCAL (the Association for the Teaching of African, Caribbean, Asian and Associated Literatures), which was a very active organisation located in Britain which held annual conferences and acted as a successful pressure group in the late

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1970s and early 1980s to persuade exam boards to include figures like Jean Rhys or V S Naipaul on their Advanced level courses. This was the period before 'multiculturalism' as such or real policies for curriculum change had really begun to have much impact in schools. When ATCAL began to lose its force in the mid-eighties – largely because in a sense its work had begun to be done by the school inspectorate and others – it seemed that it would be a good idea to found a publication that would enable some of these debates to go on and to continue to give

prominence to the writers and their work which could so easily get lost. I should add that since its inception, the ways in which this area of literature has been named has gone through a number of different incarnations ranging from 'Commonwealth' to 'New Literatures' to 'postcolonial' and now sometimes

'transnational'. But such critical terminologies, whatever their uses, should not detract from the writings themselves or the political significance of the important cultural debates that have surrounded them.

You could say that the evolution of *Wasafiri's* history is a story that parallels in some ways many of these shifts and turns in the cultural politics of literature: similar, say, to a publication such as *Third Text* which was fighting comparable battles in the visual arts world. So I guess one day it will be an interesting archive for someone to look at, a part in fact of the 'national' archive or 'cultural heritage' of Britain as they say these days. This is ironic in a way, because one of our struggles over the years has been to gain for the magazine the proper literary attention it deserves, not to move it out of the margins into the mainstream as people sometimes say, but rather to show that its concerns have always been at the heart of contemporary modernity even if they have not always been seen to be so until recently.

JB It has been over ten years since my last interview with you. During that time I have noticed that while the title *Wasafiri* has stayed constant, the subtitle has changed and it is now called the *Magazine of International Contemporary Writing*. Could you talk about this and why you made this change?

SN Readers have often asked why we have not included words like 'postcolonial' in our subtitle and have instead focused either on regional/cultural derivation or simply the general term as we have it now of international contemporary writing. In the early years we described ourselves as a magazine that focused on African, Caribbean, South Asian and associated literatures. This was partly due to our links with ATCAL (mentioned earlier), but was also and more significantly a strategic decision. At the time there was no other magazine that focused on these literatures in Britain. We wanted to signal this and to provide serious literary coverage for authors from these backgrounds. It was political in the sense that we needed at that point to signal our difference whilst at the same time stressing the quality of our contributors. This period has passed and as many will know resulted in many

heated debates during the 1980s and early 1990s about questions of cultural identity and how it should be represented. It was also important for practical reasons in terms of getting funding from arts bodies who wanted to fulfil their cultural diversity quotas. We were not playing to this, but inevitably it was an issue, though I always argued and still do that this was a double-edged sword. On the one hand we gained funding and acceptance amongst the already initiated; but it also meant for many years and in some misguided reviews that we were seen as a 'black' literary magazine concerned primarily with political rather than aesthetic questions. In fact what we were trying to do was to create a forum for conversations between writers and to signal the evolution of a community of texts which could speak to each other across worlds.

I think now that many of these battles have been fought. Things anyhow are definitely better than they were in the 1980s, but people still find it hard to accept that a magazine like *Wasafiri* is a mainstream contemporary literary publication which is telling not the 'other' story as Rasheed Araeen (editor of *Third*

Text) once put it, describing the ways in which Afro-Caribbean and South Asian visual artists have tended to be located by art critics in the UK, but the 'whole' story. Those with a serious interest in contemporary writing are depriving themselves if they don't read it and are consequently missing out and unaware of a number of significant modern writers. So our move from 'African, Caribbean' etc, to 'Contemporary Writing' reflects not only our confidence now – we don't have to signal who we are any longer – but also a shift in cultural perceptions both in Britain and abroad. Perhaps you could say that finally we have 'come of age' and are no longer just a magazine, as some would still like to pigeonhole us, for the promotion of 'new' and predominantly non-white writing. To promote the work of new voices is of course still what we often do but 'new' can be a dangerous word and often suggests something not quite there, not quite good enough, that has not yet arrived. It is therefore easy to dismiss writing under this label as either a youthful but not quite established branch of the old (ie, the canon) or an upstart of some kind. We have also broadened our original remit quite a bit over the past twenty years and publish material now from a wide range of different cultural contexts.

That is not to say we are attempting to sidestep what are still crucial political and racial inequalities in terms of the ways in which some writers are still received (if they are unknown and have not just won a prize), but rather to suggest that our contributors, as we move on in the twenty-first century, and who include a number of white writers too, are all now in a sense 'wasafiri'. Stories have always travelled and literature has always been a mish-mash of different influences and ideas that have migrated across continents. This is the case whatever period you look at in history: whether in the classical period or the medieval and modern. Cultural admixture and cross pollination has always

been a norm whatever side of the fence you are sitting on. Our contributors are often, in other words, participants in what is now acknowledged to be a more general cultural phenomenon; they form a literary community linked by the world of words, the world of the imagination and write across the often narrow boundary lines denoted by national/ethnic identities. A theme that is surely very important and relevant in our troubled times.

JB What are the main areas of literature represented in *Wasafiri*?

SN The magazine covers five main areas: fiction, poetry, drama, critical essays and reviews. It also always includes an interview with a writer and a contemporary artist in every issue. Writers we

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have recently featured include Nadine Gordimer (Nobel Prize winner), Austin Clarke (Commonwealth Writers Prize winner for 2003), Courttina Newland and Jacob Ross, Caryl Phillips as well as many others. And of course in the current issue we are publishing discussions between David Dabydeen and Derek Walcott as well as Maggie

Gee and Anita Desai. We have recently attempted to make links between what is going on in the art and literary worlds and have featured works by a number of major artists including Yinka Shonibare and Chris Ofili (Turner Prize Winner), Andres Serrano, and Fred Wilson, who represented the USA at the Venice Biennale in 2003. Each issue is about 50,000 words in length and we come out three times a year which is a lot of material. We are supported by a distinguished Editorial Board again drawn from a wide constituency across the literary, publishing and academic worlds. We tend to produce quite a few special issues on areas that we feel merit attention. Our most recent one was on Translation; we have a film issue coming up this year, guest edited by Sukhdev Sandhu, a Fanon issue early in 2005 and an issue on 'Arab literatures' planned for the future. These special issues such as our 'Re-Inventing Britain' issue which was subtitled 'Taking the Cake', and our issue on the South Asian Diaspora have often been important in signposting new creative and critical directions. We have also often collaborated with literary prizes and short story competitions publishing the work of young writers who have won, as we did with the Caine Prize and the recent BBC Short Story Competition. We do, however, always publish several general issues to maintain our range and to cater to as wide a readership as is possible.

JB When *Wasafiri* was first launched other journals concerned with the area of 'Commonwealth Literature' or 'New Literatures in English' seemed aimed at an academic audience and the journals tended to speak to a limited, although important, audience of teachers. I know that *Wasafiri* has aimed to reach a broader audience and has always had a more contemporary feel in line with other mainstream literary journals. The design, for example, has always looked lively, colourful and contemporary.

SN Yes, we have always attempted to avoid being seen only as a specialist academic publication. We do of course speak to many academics and teachers interested in subjects like postcolonial literatures or questions of transnationalism and diaspora and many of the critical essays we publish address such issues. We tend to avoid long footnotes though [laughs]. One of our intentions has always been to exist both within and outside the academic world because sometimes certain orthodoxies get formed within such a context and this can become stultifying and impose frames on writers whose work does not always fit. It is a difficult path to tread at times, but one of our key interests really is to publish quality writing and to introduce new readers to such work. We want to speak to the general public as much as the specialist. If one doesn't do that, one can get trapped. That is why (often against the advice of distributors, subscription agencies and bookshops) we have kept our colourful magazine format. I always wanted *Wasafiri* to be a magazine that people could just pick up and read. We work hard on making sure it has a lively and attractive appearance and often feature the work of contemporary artists on its cover.

JB *Wasafiri* is a magazine which has always published criticism and reviews, but it has always looked to me as a magazine which has aimed to put the main accent on the work of writers of fiction, poetry and drama. Of course, criticism is a vital part of the journal and the best criticism is truly creative in itself, but how do you see this balance between imaginative and critical writing in the journal?

SN That is of course a chicken and egg situation. Which comes first? In my view the writing without doubt leads the way, which is not to say that critical readings of the literature and reviews are not crucial to its reception, popularity and development. But yes, we have tended to give a great deal of space to creative writing because it is important for many writers to be able to publish in a magazine such as this which features the famous as well as the less well known, enabling dialogues to develop between them. Yet the critical is important too and provides a forum for debate. *Wasafiri* has often run features on important debates such as the discussion that took place over several issues initiated by Peter Hulme and the well-known Caribbean poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite on the location of Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Similarly the reviews section is an important resource for readers, writers and publishers as we are often able to give much fuller coverage to writers who would not manage necessarily to get seen elsewhere. In this sense we have often broken new ground. It is important to seek to maintain a creative dialogue between the creative writer and the critic, particularly as many literary texts are often inherently self-theorising.

JB Over the years you have published the first work of many writers who have since risen to prominence.

SN Yes, and we have also published many now established writers who remain keen to support the magazine. Poets such as Jackie Kay and Fred D'Aguiar published some of their early work with us, Earl Lovelace wrote one of the first editorials, Ngugi wa Thiong'o was an early contributor as were David Dabydeen, Aamer Hussein, Mike Phillips, Vikram Seth, Wilson Harris, Ama Ata Aidoo and Nayantara Sahgal. We have also carried work by a number of writers who are no longer with us such as Attia Hosain, Sam Selvon and Beryl Gilroy. And we are still publishing work by a number of young writers, who I can tell you now are going to be important in the future.

JB I have always found the interviews with writers a very important contribution and these discussions again chart a history, as many of them took place around literary prizes or at significant events.

SN I think in the forty-one issues we have published we have included over fifty interviews. Some of these as you know will appear in a celebratory birthday book to be published by Routledge entitled *Writing Across Worlds*, which is due out at the same time as the birthday issue this year. Interestingly when I came to put that book together I found that we had covered an enormous spread of writers and contexts ranging from V S Naipaul or Salman Rushdie to Moyez Vassanji, Wole Soyinka, Kazuo Ishiguro, Lorna Goodison, George Lamming, Caryl Phillips, Bernardine Evaristo and Andrew Salkey. These writers lived or live in different moments of history and their conversations are still relevant. Often, as in the current issue, such interviews took place between two writers in discussion. Early on in *Wasafiri's* history we had Wilson Harris as an established writer from Guyana talking to Fred D'Aguiar, then a young poet and not well known. In the birthday issue we have Anita Desai talking to Maggie Gee as well as Derek Walcott with David Dabydeen. I suppose the significance of the interviews is not only the fact that readers get to hear writers talking about their own work, but that such dialogues set up a much broader conversation which has important reverberations in terms of how traditions are formed and influences work. Perhaps one of the most notable occasions was our interview with Rushdie which took place during his participation at a conference on South Asian diasporic writing in Britain which I helped to organise at the University of London when he was still under the fatwa. Oddly enough I ended up teaching his then bodyguard in my MA seminar on the same subject!

JB *Wasafiri* has been grant funded by the Arts Council for some years. How has the relationship worked for you?

SN Before we became a regular client of the Arts Council in 1991, *Wasafiri* had been dependent for its survival on one-off grants from various public funding pockets and academic institutions. I remember we got a one-off grant to publish a Black-British issue

in the 1980s from the GLC [Greater London Council]. Then we sometimes got bits of cultural diversity funding, but it was not until we moved to being seen as a mainstream client alongside *London Review of Books*, the *London Magazine*, *Stand* and others that *Wasafiri* was able to feel at all secure in terms of planning several issues ahead. The Arts Council have been wonderfully supportive; they have also helped at times with suggesting new directions and structures. I was particularly grateful during the period Clarissa Luard (now deceased) was Literature Officer there as she encouraged me to extend the range of our international board and make *Wasafiri* formally a company and charity. This was very important as before then we had been dependent on a fairly loose structure and I was never sure who owned the intellectual capital of the magazine. We now have a large international Editorial Board as well as a Board of Directors and Trustees. And Arts Council England has been very good about funding our birthday year: we are doing a lot of live events in 2004 including a major day at the South Bank Centre in London on September 11.

We have had our critics though, who have sniped at the fact that the Arts Council are funding us not for reasons of aesthetic merit but political correctness! This as you can imagine makes one fume, particularly when such comments come out in places like the *Times Literary Supplement* which then rather unfortunately perpetuates the myth that *Wasafiri* is a kind of literary ghetto for second-rate writers! One just has to look at the kinds of people who have contributed, whether critics or writers, and many of whom also publish in the mainstream press to see that this is rubbish, but the image somehow keeps recurring. Perhaps I should have chosen another name!

JB *Wasafiri* has had a number of different editorial homes over the years and has been with Queen Mary College for some time.

SN I think as with many editors of literary magazines both in the past and today, *Wasafiri* has followed me around. It is older than my children and ran initially from my house, then was stored in a pub basement in Islington, later moved briefly to the University of Kent, then to Randolph Vigne of Instructa and finally to Queen Mary College at the University of London where it is still based. It moved there in 1992 when I was appointed to the Department of English & Drama and remained after I left. The department there have also been very supportive by providing us with office space and facilities, as have the Open University more recently in terms of my editorial time and small amounts of funding. In reality *Wasafiri* runs from a small office (at

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the moment in the East End of London) and is supported on a day to day basis by a very small number of part-time editorial staff.

But yes, the magazine too has travelled. Where next I wonder in the years to come? We remain, as all ventures like this, dependant on institutional funding and a lot of good will, as well as our contributors and subscribers for survival.

JB You have maintained an editorial distance from publishers over the years and have always published *Wasafiri* independently. Is there a reason for this?

SN I have often thought about going over to a publisher. It would

be much easier in some ways as they would handle all the production and subscription management which would mean far less hassle for me and my staff at the *Wasafiri* office. We have in fact been approached by two or three publishers and I am thinking about it again. But one of the main reasons we have remained independent is rather similar to what I was saying earlier about fashionable orthodoxies. I have always been a little nervous about how cultural diversity is marketed. In particular recently amidst the razzmatazz of prizes such as the Booker and others. That is not to say such prizes are not important; they have of course made careers and obviously literary taste has changed. The kinds of writers we have been publishing for years are now much more popular and are generally better known. Yet I still resist being marketed as one kind of thing and feel slightly reticent about adopting the postcolonial label which I know sells very well in catalogues and on the net.

JB You are editing an anthology of interviews celebrating twenty years of *Wasafiri*. Can you tell me something about this project?

SN As I mentioned earlier we are trying to commemorate the achievements of the magazine this year and draw attention to the contribution it has made to changing perceptions of contemporary writing. The anthology is really part of this, but the way it happened again represents quite an interesting story. It took a

while I should say to get it commissioned by a mainstream publisher even though many of the publishers I approached in fact are the publishers of the writers in it! Words like 'ethnic' or 'minority' kept resurfacing as well as a complete inability to understand what the magazine is doing. I won't rehearse all the publishers I approached or the contributors to the anthology, but I can

assure you they are some of the most distinguished contemporary writers publishing today. This reception from these publishers represents a kind of doublespeak which still persists sadly amongst some mainstream literary editors who cannot see

beyond certain conventional categorisations. This was surprising given that many of the writers interviewed in the volume are without question now part of the supposed 'canon'.

The book will really be a companion volume to the twentieth birthday issue which is coming out at the same time. It is called *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk* and is a collection of conversations published in the magazine since 1984. It aims both to present a number of key dialogues with some of the world's most distinguished writers and also reflects an important cultural history. The writers interviewed stem from many corners of the globe and as I began to put the anthology together a number of important affiliations as well as differences began to emerge. *How far is the local also the international? Is migration something that always involves continental drift or can small journeys across nations be equally important? Many of the interviews took place following the awards of prizes; some mark important anniversaries such as the fifty year anniversary of the arrival of SS Windrush in 1948 when so many migrants from the Caribbean arrived in Britain. There are also debates on issues such as language and politics or the difficulties of existing in translation (whether literally or metaphorically).*

Most significantly perhaps, the volume shows how important it is for writers to keep on writing and through this process stretch the English language across the borders of the world by making connections and breaking down barriers that constantly reappear. This is particularly important today, I believe, in a post September 11 world where 'fear' of the 'other' (whoever that 'other' supposedly is) has begun to seriously dominate and restrict physical and imaginative freedoms. Writers have a vital role to play in this re-visioning and re-imagining (they always have) and the idea of literature and the imagination as a vehicle to cross over between such worlds, across the tight borderlines of prejudice and sometimes belief, should not be underestimated. The dialogues in this book profile many of these issues and offer us illuminations. They give us an historical

perspective on some of the conversations that are going on right now and also enable such conversations to continue. This anniversary issue of the magazine is publishing new fiction and poetry from many of the writers interviewed in the book.

JB How do you see the future as far as the magazine is concerned?

SN I hope that it will continue to flourish and that it will continue to change with the times it finds itself in. It has always been a delicate balancing act to create a history, to make a real place for literature to be published in rather than just create an imaginative space. And one will always be tied up with literary and cultural politics however hard one tries to avoid it. Given that more and more readers and writers across the globe are becoming interested in the issues we are concerned with, issues of cross-culturalism and the need to sustain an international community of literary voices which speak to each other across the pages of their books, the future should be bright. Let's hope so.

Susheila Nasta is a critic, teacher, editor and broadcaster. Currently a Reader in Literature at the Open University, she has also taught at the Universities of London and Cambridge. Early publications included the first collection of critical essays on Sam Selvon as well as a critical anthology on women's writing from Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean and Britain entitled Motherlands (Womens Press, 1991; Rutgers 1992).

She has acted as judge for a number of literary awards and is currently a member of the advisory committee for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. Her most recent monograph Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain was published by Palgrave in 2002 and is the first book to examine South Asian writing in Britain. Her celebratory volume of interviews with over thirty writers which have appeared in the pages of Wasafiri since 1984 and entitled Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk will be published by Routledge in July 2004. A monograph on Jamaica Kincaid, Writing a Life is forthcoming.