

ARTS

Horrific experiences inspire critically-acclaimed novel

By Stephanie Thiessen
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Miltonian Stacey Newman has sat face to face with women who've experienced firsthand the horrors of such war-torn countries as Bosnia and Afghanistan.

She's researched world conflicts that have caused unbelievable suffering to humanity. And the one thing she's learned — besides the tragedy of war — is that there are no easy answers.

But that doesn't mean we can leave the problems to others to solve, Newman said. It's up to us to learn as much as we can, a message conveyed in her recently released book, *The Beauty of the World*.

"My objective is only to make people think, not to hit them over the head with a message," Newman said, adding, "I wanted to show that any type of black and white thinking is dangerous."

Although Newman said the book isn't political, it does aim to get readers thinking about political issues.

"The reason I wrote the book is my own ideas about what I feel we've allowed to happen in the world post 9/11," said the first-time novelist.

The *Beauty of the World* is fiction inspired by the reality of situations in several areas — Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Rwanda, Columbia and Venezuela.

"Some of the people are inspired by real war survivors," Newman said.

She chose fiction because she felt it would allow for the element of drama and offer the broadest audience.

Fiction would also allow her to incorporate the heart-wrenching experiences of the people she interviewed without exploiting them.

"I didn't want to put their grief on display," Newman explained. "I just wanted to use them to create characters that reflected en masse what these people experienced."

The book has received critical acclaim, including a review in the *Globe and Mail*, which described it as "a political novel with a clear stance on global power struggles."

It follows six characters through a storyline Newman said arose from a dream she had. Among them is Sophie, a North American journalist who finds herself trying to get help for the people of the fictitious country Perda, who find themselves in the midst of civil war.

There's also Bellona, the most powerful politician in Perda, and her daughter, Talia, who leads a rebellion against her mother's government and goes missing.

It doesn't take much in-depth examination to recognize real-life scenarios in Perda. For example, one character denounces the conflict by comparing it

— without naming names — to the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. She also speaks of Perda moving outside the sanctions of the U.N., echoing the U.S.

When Bellona sets up internment camps for dissenters, they become rape camps — no doubt based on Newman's interviews with Bosnian women.

Although she started out with an almost arrogant sense of wanting to get a point across, Newman said, by the end of this writing journey she realized just how little she really knows.

"Talking with people (who've been through war), I'm almost ashamed. I don't know half of what I'm talking about," she said.

Despite the horrors of war, Newman still believes beauty does exist in the world. And she retains her self-described idealistic view that one person can make a difference.

"I think it takes someone brave to stand up and say, 'Yes, I think (one person) can make the world better'."

One way she's making a difference is by donating a portion of the proceeds to Doctors Without Borders.

The *Beauty of the World*, published by Wingate Press, can be purchased in bookstores across the country.

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A REAL PAGE-TURNER: Stacey Newman looks over a copy of her recently-released novel *The Beauty of the World*.

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