

EDITING *A GIRL IS A BODY OF WATER*

An interview with Masie Cochran



Before you read the book, what was it that made you curious about it or drew you to it?

Veronica Goldstein, Jennifer’s agent, sent a superb pitch—when you edit, you start to learn and recognize people’s tastes, and then you perk up when you see their name in your inbox. In Veronica’s pitch she talked about Jennifer’s ideas about origin stories and the feminist lens. Even before starting to read the book, then, I was inclined toward its subject matter because it was new for me, and exciting. It’s so appealing to find something that feels modern but traces back to origin stories. I read *Let’s Tell This Story Properly* around the same time as acquisition and I just continued to be blown away by Jennifer’s storytelling prowess. She asks big questions, and then follows them through with big story.

What was the moment when you really fell for this book and knew you had to have it? Were there any individual lines that really clinched it for you?

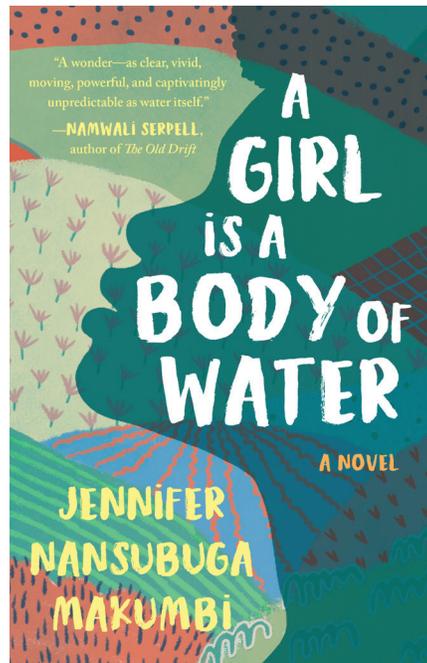
I usually try not to fall in love on page one, but after the first page I knew. The line “A mosquito came zwinging” did it; when a writer invents a word that should’ve been a word forever—mosquitoes zwing, that’s what they do!—and that is now a word in my mind, that’s incredible. I live in the rural American South and mosquitoes are a constant, and I grew up listening to that noise my whole life. Now, because of Jennifer, I have a word for it. Also, the way that Jennifer is able to begin an epic origin story with another epic origin story, as Kirabo takes on the role of storyteller, was so masterfully done. I could tell from the start I was in skillful hands.

What about working on this book surprised you the most?

It was a book I wanted to be careful with, I think, because the book is so woven, so detailed, so meticulous—you can’t cut a thread without affecting something later. I was surprised

because I initially thought “Oh, I might cut this peripheral character” but no, this character plays an integral role later on! There can be an urge as an editor to cut, to get to the action. There are many characters introduced early on, and lots of folklore, and a mix of English and Luganda—words that might be unfamiliar to some readers. But that is okay, even necessary, because American readers are the visitors in this story; the characters are not visiting American readers.

I reckoned with some editorial instincts—the urge to explain, italicize, offer another word where there isn’t always an English equivalent, etc. But I think it’s okay to ask readers to step outside that comfort zone, to look things up they might not recognize. It’s worth keeping the complexity in the prose rather than pushing it to make it more digestible, to make it somehow easier. It was a big learning experience, and I followed Jennifer’s lead. For example, Jennifer mentioned that the English taught in Uganda is British English, so we didn’t change the British spellings as we sometimes do. We decided that if we set unfamiliar words or phrases off—always using italics—for readers, we would have been prioritizing the American reading experience or implying that the reader’s clarity is the most important thing, but for the characters exchanging the dialogue, it’s their words, of course deeply familiar, and to set them off as different or unfamiliar or to change the spelling would not make sense in the context of their exchange on the page.



What do you want readers to take away from it?

For a variety of reasons I’ve discussed with Jennifer, a lot of American readers don’t seem to expect a happy childhood story set in an African country; it’s yet another potential layer of distance between readers and these characters. But—despite Kirabo’s central questions about her mother—she has all this love and all this support around her, and she is surrounded by people who are willing to do hard work to make her life better. There is so much care in this story, and so much joy, and I hope that readers feel the joy of reading this book, the musicality of its language, its daring structure, the sweeping journey Kirabo goes on, and the many female relationships in this book that captured my heart. Its ending might be one of my favorite endings ever.

One of the great things editors do is envision how a work sits in the larger literary context; what other titles, current or otherwise, do you see this book in conversation with?

I thought of a lot of great books when I first read *A Girl Is a Body of Water*. I thought of *The Water Cure*, *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*, *Stay With Me*, *What We Lose*, *Freshwater*, and more. But I can't do better than Namwali Serpell who compared Jennifer's novel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*, and Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet.

What makes me most excited about *A Girl is a Body of Water* is how singular it feels, even in this company. What makes it so different for me is how it makes origin stories, our oldest narratives, folklore, and foundational myths feel so modern. How do you take the first words that have defined characters for centuries and turn them into something contemporary, something that resonates with modern readers? It's powerful and rare to find a story that is both so timely and also deeply immersed in and knit into the oldest stories we have.