

‘THE SEED THIEF’

by Jacqui L’Ange

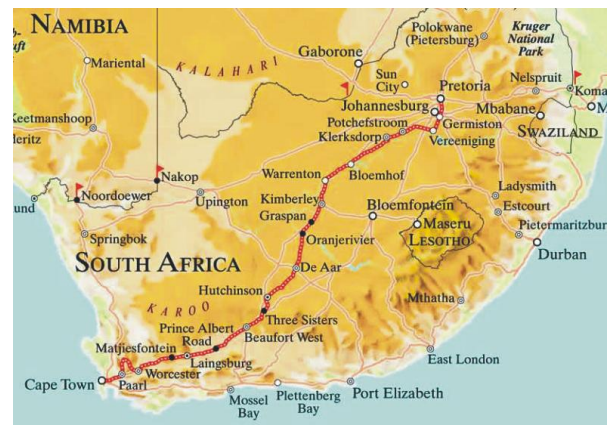
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Reviewed by: Olatoun Williams



Published in 2015 by Penguin Random House South Africa, *The Seed Thief* is Jacqui L’Ange’s debut novel. The story is set within an exciting crossroads: the fertile intersection between the life of plants ‘which contain all the beauty of the earth’, human spiritual life and the global marketplace.



Candomblé priestesses with plants

The *newbouldia mundii* is now extinct in its West African home of Benin. The only existing stand of an endangered plant species remains under the protection of ‘one of the most fiercely guarded and deeply religious cults on the planet’ – the cult of Candomblé. Botanist, Maddy Bellani, our first person narrator, has been charged with the mission to rescue this plant and to bring it back to the seed-bank in Cape Town, South Africa, where she works.

Maddy’s friends, a radical, rainbow crowd of artists and intellectuals; Nico, a soon-to-be ex-boyfriend (looking and sounding like a gigolo from a telenovela); Kirk, desperate work-place colleague who sends her on the rescue-mission, will soon be displaced by the sights and sounds of Bahia, the home of Candomblé, located in Salvador, in the north-eastern region of Brazil.

With a lifetime spent studying the weakening impact of monocultures, who better than a botanist to appreciate the strengthening function of diversity which she finds everywhere she looks on the streets of Bahia? Experience has taught Maddy Bellani that in plant life, ‘*wordless conversations*’ between one type of plant and other types within its species will generate a glorious harvest of healthy plants. Against the suffocating grey of the ‘*graffiti tagged*’ city walls, the citizens of Bahia are a riot of colours. Not for the first time, Maddy sees how the botanic principle of strength in diversity transfers equally to human life. She entertains her readers with skin-colour descriptors from the 1968 Census of Brazil: ‘*Caramel...burnt sugar, chocolate, toast, coffee-with-cream...navy blue, green,(and even) the colour of a fleeing ass*’. Descriptors ‘*more delicious than anything that could be ticked inside a bureaucratic skin-colour box*’ which ordinary Brazilians had fun using, running rings round census-accountants, ‘*confounding*’ government officials in just one of the myriad expressions of the mindset of diversity.

Readers will enjoy L’Ange’s exposé of the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé which originates in the lands of the Yorubas of West Africa. The author has skilfully woven it into a story driven by Maddy’s interactions with the residents of the *terreiro* of Ile Axe Bençois. It is they, alongside the reader, who will witness Maddy out of her sceptical scientist comfort zone, but longing - in the loneliness of her cultural and geographic displacement - to belong to a community of people united by inherited and ancient beliefs.

Nature is the means by which the communities of believers are able to meet the ritual demand of their gods - the *orixas* - for mineral, vegetable and animal sacrifices. In *The Seed Thief*, the veneration of plants by the faithful is placed in tension with global pharma hungry to get hold of the seed for its reputed cancer healing properties and also with the vested interests of private individuals. This tension of interests between the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ provides the organising principle carrying and meshing L’Ange’s exotic and layered tale of passion for the seed.

For those millions of parched souls seeking the quickening of the so-called ‘spiritual’ life, loud with auditory and visual riches, Candomblé is a feast for the senses. Its arresting, hypnotic drums access the region of our souls that responds to the pull of the dark and the supernatural. But behind a pageantry staged for religious tourists, a double, deadly face of Candomblé exists which the book’s prologue evokes and about which adherents to the faith are quiet. Throbbing with occultic tones, it is the dark presence of this deadly face that Maddy experiences at the strange ceremony of the Candomblé Jeje. Cinematic opportunities are rampant here and it will come as no surprise to readers to learn that soon after publication, rights for a film adaptation of *The Seed Thief* were acquired by independent producer: ‘*Rodrigo Chiaro for an international co-production with links to Brazil, Panama, Europe, Singapore, as well as South Africa.*’ (Brittle Paper, 2017).

I belong to the Yoruba tribe of West Africa in which Candomblé originates and I enjoyed playing the god recognition game. We spell the collective name of our pagan pantheon, *orisa*, with an *s*. In Bahia, the *s* becomes an *x*. In Bahia: *Yemanja*, *Ossum*, *Xango*, *Exu* become, in Yoruba: *Yemanja*, *Osun*, *Shango*, *Esu*. The pronunciation of the name of each god in both cultures is the same. *Olodumare*, almighty overseer to whom the *orisas/orixas* must give account, boasts exactly the same name in our two cultures. *Olodumare* inhabits the outer circle of *orun* - the nine-levelled realm. In Yoruba our heaven is identically named.



Candomblé priestess with tourist



Candomblé priestesses

Beyond the book's exposé of Candomblé, a plethora of Yoruba foods and words lay waiting for my discovery, but I hesitate to write '*beyond Candomblé.*' To understand how difficult it is to prise apart its practices from Bahia's wider culture, you only need count the number of times Maddy stumbles across blood sacrifices on city's streets. Nevertheless, each time Maddy Bellani was served *acaraje* (fried bean cake), I experienced a tiny, smiling *frisson* of recognition: I too had eaten *acara* for breakfast right there in my Lagos flat that morning.

What Jacqui L'Ange has done in *The Seed Thief* is to present to her readers clear evidence that 300 years of slavery 4,000 miles from Africa were powerless to erase, even erode, African cultural heritage. This is an historical fact which elicits in me not only fascination but a sly smile of triumph in praise of the magic of the (white) mask. To imagine that Catholicism, forced on them, would be the salvation of the souls of some 3,000,000 transported Africans, is astounding. How could the slavers ever imagine that their monotheist, saint-driven European religion would not only serve but endure as the home in which the African slave would hide his own culture and identity? From their high tower of supremacy, looking down, could the slavers have foreseen in Catholicism, a sanctuary for the pantheist African soul? A sanctuary that would not only survive persecution and endure but expand through the centuries into an international community which today – 2018 - boasts an estimated 2,000,000 Candomblé believers spilling over the borders of Brazil into Argentina, Paraguay, Venezuela, Uruguay and via the migrant Latino community, into the United States.

But what imbues *The Seed Thief with* power is for me not the mystery of Candomblé: there can for me be none in human scale, earthbound gods conceived and crafted by man in his

own image and in the image of his materialism. Candomblé is a religion of the market place. Rooted in the organic, it is materialist in intention, scope and destination despite its nine-levelled heaven and the spirit possession its ritual pageantry comes dressed up in.

Ultimately, it is the intellect of the protagonist, blowing like cool sea-breeze, which enlivens and inspires the text and endows L'Ange's book. Born in Brazil to a white South African (deceased) mother and an absentee Italian-American father, Maddy Bellani is a shining exponent of the phenomenon of the third culture child. Like most children born into the Diaspora and into families defined by diversity, she is blessed with a prismic understanding of life and a luminous intelligence both of which sparkle like jewels throughout her narration. But – and this is true to type - a chronic vulnerability- fragility even- engendered by a sense of homelessness and a feeling of *otherness*, threatens if not to sabotage, then to subsume these virtues which, combined with an evangelical zeal for the conservation of nature, make her the perfect seed thief.

In his Christian book *Rediscovering the Spirit*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1986) Rob Warner describes this age as 'an uprooted' one: 'Everyone's on the move. The most common problem today isn't money or sex, it is loneliness'.

Writing intimately in the first person, Maddy shares thoughts generously not only about her mission to bring back the star seed from Bahia but about her insecurities, her loneliness and yearning to find a home for herself and her efforts to be at peace in the world. About her current home she says:

'When I came to Cape Town, I expected post-modern hybridity. Instead I found dislocation. A shared sense of displacement that didn't seem enough to bind people together. This collection of tribes, so far from everywhere, seemed permanently unsettled. Nobody belonged here, so everybody did. It made for a discomfort zone and that suited me fine.'



Candomblé - bird sacrifice

This wonderful description of post-Apartheid Cape Town is also a photograph of zeitgeist beyond South African borders. It is a facsimile of the 'on the move' condition of Jacqui L'Ange's heroine and other third culture children whose numbers are rising exponentially in cities around the world. Children caught in the difficult but exhilarating flux of borders opening and closing, of humans dying, traditions dying, of racial and political boundaries loosening, of diversity spreading, of bigotry's stymieing of diversity, of old cultures fighting for their lives, and of brave, new ones being born.

Authors' Biography



Jacqui L'Ange is a molecular biologist, nature-lover and journalist resident in Cape Town, South Africa. She was **born** in Durban, South Africa, and grew up across five continents. Her debut novel ***The Seed Thief*** was published in 2015, long listed for the Sunday Times Fiction Award and shortlisted for the 2016 Etisalat Prize for Literature. Film rights to the novel have been bought by independent producer, Rodrigo Chiaro.



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