

Promised Land, Behind the Scenes

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Part I
Getting Started: Me First! A Usurper Cuts in Line

In a sense, *Promised Land* was an “unplanned” literary offspring—or at least a usurper. Another novel entirely was to have been my first full-length literary effort. Today, that novel remains yet unformed, a decades-old collection of personal notes and article clippings in a file folder. *Promised Land* demanded to be first, without ever having been so much as a twinkle in my imagination prior to the circumstances that led to its conception.

WHY THIS PARTICULAR STORY?

I was born on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, then still a British colony. This region, which covers the area between the coasts of Florida and Venezuela, is also known as the West Indies, so called because Columbus is said to have mistakenly thought that he had reached India, hundreds of miles to the east. Thereafter, India was referred to as the East Indies. St. Vincent and the Grenadines, as the entire island group is called, is approximately 150 square miles. In my childhood, television was not yet available there; in Kingstown, the island’s capital, movies were shown just a few times a week at its lone cinema, Lyric Theatre.

My fondest childhood memories are filled with outdoor games played in front yards, in open fields, at the beach. They are filled with card games and board games played with family members and neighbors. They are filled with books. One of my most enduring memories, from age five, was finally being old enough to get my own library card. As I recall, the limit for one visit was four books; I usually left with the maximum and returned the following week. My dad

would wait for me in the car as I scoured the library’s index cards and bookshelves (the Bobbsey Twins stories, set somewhere in the United States, were among my favorites in the early years).

In 1964, with my parents, May and Alfred, and my brother Ron, I immigrated to the United States, first living in New York for a few months, until moving on Thanksgiving Day of the same year to California, where we settled permanently in the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area.

My birth country was one of extended families—not just grandparents, but also aunts, uncles, and cousins, as well as unrelated family friends (the older ones of whom younger generations might also call, respectfully, “Aunt” and “Uncle”). Between 1997 and 2000, three members of that extended family—my cousins Marilyn and Nesta, and family friend Edith—each died of cancer. They were three of my favorite people. (Marilyn and Edith had lived with us at different times before we moved to the US.) I began feeling a particular need to spend some time with a few caring souls. As one means to that end, I chose to use my imagination. The idea that would eventually produce *Promised Land* was conceived. On December 17, 2000, my mother succumbed to congestive heart failure. I started my work on *Promised Land* in earnest.

I have long been interested in trying to identify ways to replicate certain events that have had a positive impact on the human experience and to minimize or avoid entirely those that have had a negative impact. That interest was the source of a term paper my senior year of college in the 1960s, an integral aspect of my job with a local government agency in the 1970s and ’80s, and the underlying motivation for my lifelong commitment to the field of education. And identifying solutions usually involves gathering and analyzing data, which is largely what *Promised Land* was for me: An exercise to (1) select some of the traits and behaviors that exemplify what is most admirable in humans (such as compassion, integrity, and humility); (2) envision a few characters who embody those traits and behaviors; and (3) tell their stories, setting them in

different global locations.

WHY THESE PARTICULAR LOCALES?

Inclusiveness was my overall objective in writing *Promised Land*; thus, each of the major continents should be represented in at least one of the first seven chapters, each of which has a different narrator. And so chapters 1 through 7 are set primarily in the United States of America, Peru, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Brazil, Ireland, India, and Vietnam, respectively. Learning more about those countries and cultures through my research was also an intended bonus for me.

Additionally, treating the chapters as separate, though related, short stories, with multiple groups of characters from varied environments and circumstances, allowed me to challenge myself in a way that might not have been possible had I followed a single group of characters throughout the book. It also allowed me to work with an even more polychromatic palette, a broader range of textures and tones, making the process that much more enjoyable for me.

Chapter 1, the USA: This being the country where I have lived for more than 40 years and had some of my most significant experiences, I would have been hard-pressed to justify not selecting it as one of the seven locales.

Choosing specific locations within the US was largely influenced by practical considerations. For example, the narrator, Sydney, needed to live on a farm in an area within plausible range of a sudden, if extraordinary, Arctic cold front in winter, such as that described in the opening scenes of the chapter. With its relative proximity to California, where I live, Idaho fit the bill mainly on the basis of my own literary comfort level. Similarly, although I have never been to Atlanta,

Georgia, I also felt a certain familiarity with the area. I could imagine Mack, a devoted family man with strong church ties, being a product of that city, birthplace of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Selecting a California site for the spaceport where Sydney and his partner, Jake, would ultimately depart for Mars was not nearly as cut-and-dried as I had anticipated. I had intended to create a fictional location called Arcadia. (It had a paradoxically ancient yet futuristic ring to it.) However, such a city already existed in California, and in the southern part of the state, whereas I wanted the spaceport to be closer to Idaho. After a few more unsuccessful attempts at giving the site a name that would be unique in California, I settled on the real-life town of Arcata.

Chapter 2, Peru: In 1990 Peru elected Alberto Fujimori as its first president of Japanese ancestry. In my early twenties I had developed an interest in Japanese culture, which has included studying the language (though only very superficially so far). Over the years, I also have enjoyed personal as well as professional relationships with several individuals of Japanese ancestry. I majored in Spanish. Peru was almost a foregone choice for a chapter set in South America.

Chapter 3, the DRC: This was one instance where my fondness for the pragmatic almost backfired. My selection was based purely on the DRC being centrally located on the African continent and also large. The map from which I made my selection had been published when the country was still known as Zaire. In my childhood, it had been known as the Belgian Congo; there was even a calypso commemorating the country’s turbulent return to local sovereignty. A few words from that song are etched in my memory: “Doctor Kasavubu and Patrice Lumumba fighting for power over Katanga.”

I did not make the connection between “Zaire” and “Belgian Congo” until I began my research for that chapter a few weeks later. Until then, I had envisioned writing about a former colony of

an English-speaking—not French-speaking—European country.

I had already anticipated that *Promised Land* would be a demanding project simply because of the number of locales and characters involved, plus the broad time range that the stories would cover overall (from approximately 1940 to 2040). Despite my having studied French for a few years, having to assume the personas of French-speaking characters meant added effort that did not appeal to me in the least at that point. I tried to wriggle out of my selection; but I soon saw the positive literary possibilities of the DRC’s Belgian/French heritage. The Democratic Republic of the Congo prevailed as the ideal selection for that chapter.

Chapter 4, Brazil: I chose this location because of certain elements that it allowed me to incorporate into a single chapter; namely, a narrator of indigenous ancestry, Roberto Perreira; the wonders of nature, in the form of the Amazon and the rain forests; and yet another cultural influence, Portuguese.

Chapter 5, Ireland: This locale appealed to me primarily for certain pastoral images that I associate with Ireland, in particular vivid green vegetation (an Emerald Isle it is indeed); sheep grazing on hillsides (I have traveled by train from California to Washington State, just for the relaxing effects of gazing out from a window seat at livestock lazing in pastures along the way; and thatched-roof cottages (the sight virtually transports you to the pulse-slowng pace of centuries long past).

Chapter 6, India: East Indian culture is very much a part of West Indian culture, and so has always been part of my life to some extent. Long before the current technology boom, India has been providing workers to the rest of the world. There are significant numbers of Indians throughout the Caribbean. Trinidad and Tobago has the eighth largest Indian population (almost 500,000) outside of India itself. I grew up hearing Indian music broadcast by Trinidadian radio

stations. My mom often visited friends on that island, taking me with her twice. There I saw cinemas devoted to Indian movies, and other examples of the culture.

Although my much smaller island has a comparably smaller Indian population, their influence on that culture is also evident (curry dishes are a staple of the cuisine there, as they are on many other Caribbean islands, and are among my favorites). My cousin Nesta’s mom was of Indian ancestry; she married my mom’s brother Jack.

In the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area, where I now live, Indians are an integral part of the cultural landscape. They have been my neighbors, my co-workers, my fellow passengers on public transportation. On neighborhood sidewalks there are toddlers in strollers, accompanied by mothers and grandmothers dressed in brightly colored, elegantly simple saris. There are Indian TV programs and restaurants and magazines, all affording me ample opportunity to expand my familiarity with the culture.

Chapter 7, Vietnam: For this chapter, I initially considered China, speculating that its mere size and rich history could help me generate a strong storyline with little effort. However, before long I selected Vietnam instead, having become reasonably familiar with that country and its culture largely through personal, though indirect, war-related experiences.

There are significant numbers of Vietnamese living in the Bay Area, many of whom came here in the 1970s as refugees from the war in their country. Since that time, through work and otherwise, I have interacted with a number of Vietnamese refugees and other immigrants, as well as their American-born children.

Perhaps even more than through my direct contact with persons of Vietnamese ancestry, I was influenced to use Vietnam as a setting because, given the US presence there during the war, I had access to firsthand accounts of events taking place there then. The media were one source of

those accounts. More personally, my brother Ron served in Vietnam for almost one year. Having turned eighteen the year after we arrived in the US, he was subject to the draft at that time and was inducted the following year. Throughout his tour of duty in Vietnam, we corresponded regularly.

Space, the Other Locale: I regard *Promised Land* as a mixture of fiction, fantasy, and fact. As I stated earlier, its overriding theme is the exemplary conduct of certain characters. An underlying theme is migration from Earth to Mars and neighboring destinations, a prospect that today seems closer to science fact than fiction. This theme is touched on in various summaries of the book, including one on its back cover.

One turn of events that I did not fully anticipate was that, before reading *Promised Land*, perhaps based only on a summary that mentions the migration, some persons might conclude that the book’s action takes place primarily or exclusively in space, which is not quite the case. This notion could also be fueled by the literary genre under which the book is categorized by many sellers. At the time of publication, only the publisher, Booklocker.com, offered the option that I consider most descriptive of *Promised Land*, namely, Fiction: Spiritual. Thus, elsewhere it may be listed under Fantasy, Science Fiction, or a similar category.

Choosing Place Names: The names of many locales in *Promised Land* reflect the varied languages from which they originate. I did not want any reader’s enjoyment to be diminished by the distraction of too many place names that were particularly long or hard to pronounce. And so, in selecting existing cities and towns, I favored some place names because I felt that they would be familiar to most readers and other names because, if unfamiliar, they would at least be relatively easy to pronounce. For these reasons, I relocated some settings (for example, in Chapter 3, I sent Yvette Ndugu’s daughter, Louise, to Betioky, Madagascar, instead of to its

capital, Antananarivo). I also invented some place names entirely, such as in Chapters 2 and 4, set in Peru and Brazil, respectively, so that I could better control certain story elements related to distance and a location’s very accessibility.

I do not believe in using my fictional writings as a poorly disguised autobiography or blog. Thus, aside from dedications and acknowledgments or similar personal expressions, and as otherwise described in Parts II and III of this backstory, *Promised Land* is virtually free of any intentional references to my personal life and the people in it. One notable exception is the reference to Ireland’s County Mayo, in Chapter 5: I could not resist including a real location whose name also happened to be my mother’s nickname.

Writing about places one has not visited recently can be a challenge. My own neighborhood can change radically in a matter of days, with familiar structures demolished, new ones erected in their place. And writing about places one has never actually visited can be downright risky. I know how jarring it can be to read about a locale with which you are intimately familiar, when a detail strikes a glaringly false note. Often the dissonance results because the author is “an outsider” who has some facts about the place but perhaps insufficient empathy to make the detail “ring true.” I hope that my affection for every locale in *Promised Land* has been sufficient to help me avoid such an offense, and that if any such false notes do occur, the reader will be forgiving.

WHY THESE PARTICULAR CHARACTERS?

Generally speaking, the characters were created, of course, to achieve my overall objectives for the book, that is, to emphasize certain human qualities, to advance the overall storyline, and to

foster inclusiveness.

Assigning Roles: For each chapter I first designated a Key Character or two, for each of whom I sketched a personality outline—a few lines summarizing key traits, such as approximate age, two or three descriptive elements of the character’s personality, and perhaps occupation. A Key Character would become a chapter’s Narrator. I then envisioned other characters for each chapter, initially identifying them generically as Partner, Buddy, Wife, Son 1, Son 2, and so on.

Choosing Characters’ Names: Although this was an enjoyable task, it was by no means a simple one, especially because of the book’s multicultural nature. In some cultures a name identifies more than an individual: it can also identify the person’s gender, religion, ethnicity, even occupation or social status. For this element, I used the Internet to a significant degree. In this way, for example, for Chapter 5, which is set in Ireland, I selected names such as Rebecca, Emma, and Chloe. (I was surprised to learn that Megan is not an “Irish” name; rather it is Welsh and English.) Similarly, for Chapter 6, set primarily in India, the Internet was my source for several of the names, including Anishula, Ajay, Hari, and Janaki. It was also the source for the name Furaha, in Chapter 3, the DRC.

Some characters had name changes along the way. For example, in Chapter 1, I originally called Jake “Jack.” (Although I no longer have any idea why I made the change, I find “Jake” much better suited to that—shall we say—rakish character.) And due to a typographical error that almost eluded me entirely, in Chapter 8, for a time I referred to Mack’s son as both Danny and Donny (the latter being the name I actually used in the book).

In most instances I chose a name purely because it seemed to “fit” the character. In some instances I chose a name simply because I liked it (such as, in Chapter 5, Liam, short for William; the Shannon River also made its contribution). As with place names, I tried to give

characters names that were relatively easy to pronounce—and remember—keeping them short or at least somewhat familiar worldwide. And so I chose names like Juan, Pedro, Tran, Clara, Midori, and Yvette.

WHY THIS PARTICULAR BOOK TITLE?

Like certain other elements of *Promised Land*, I do not recall how this specific title occurred to me. (I assume that I simply found it logical, given the story itself.) However, because I seem to have had the forethought to make fairly copious notes (and, even more important, given my dislike for clutter and penchant for feeding the shredder, the forethought to preserve those notes), I have been able to determine that I had initially considered but ultimately rejected (for reasons that I also don't recall) the title *The New Frontier*.

Sometime during the summer of 2001, to see if there were any other books named *Promised Land*, I checked the database of the Alameda County library, where I did much of my initial research. Since titles usually cannot be copyrighted, I was not concerned about any legal issues if my *Promised Land* was not a unique title; however, I also did not want it to be one of many. I found only one other book by that name. (This would be not quite the case when I finally published it, almost five years later, then did a name search on the Internet. But that's a story for Part III, in which I talk about the coincidences that writing can spawn, and how they influenced my decision to publish at that time.) I made no further changes to the book's title.

WHY THIS PARTICULAR PEN NAME?

Above all, I conceived *Promised Land* as a labor of love. And from the beginning it has brought me countless moments of joy: as ideas occurred; as I developed those ideas; as the characters took shape; as I read “their” typed stories; as I shared the completed drafts, chapter by chapter, with my sister Joan and brother Ron; and, finally, as I surprised those to whom the book is dedicated with the first copies of the book itself.

No concept is more important to me than family, no expression of love for others more meaningful than sharing with them what I value most. As the book’s dedication is intended to convey, *Promised Land* is one way that I have chosen to express my love for not only my biological family, but for my entire global family. It is a celebration of our common humanity. And the pen name that I used in writing *Promised Land* is one way that I chose to share with my immediate family in particular something that I value highly: M. A. Laborde is a composite of our names.

M is the first letter of my mother’s name, May.

A is the first letter of the middle names of my siblings and me (Ashley, Annette, Allan, Anne), as well as of my dad’s first name, Alfred.

Laborde is my dad’s middle name.

Having now shared *Promised Land* with an audience beyond my family, I am finding that the elements I mention here are among those about which its readers seem most curious. In later parts of this backstory I will touch on other aspects: In “Part II - Whose Book is this Anyway?” I share some of my unexpected experiences as I “allowed” the characters free reign on their fictional journeys. In “Part III - Any Similarity to Real Persons...” I describe some of the

coincidental ways, both extraordinary and commonplace, in which fiction can mirror—and indeed anticipate—reality, even when their respective timelines occur years, sometimes centuries, apart.

As I refer to my *Promised Land* notes for the first time in years to write this backstory, the experience is somewhat like finding a message in a bottle—and making the breathtaking discovery that I myself was the sender of that message. I hope that you, too, have enjoyed this segment of the journey behind the scenes of *Promised Land* and that you will find the remaining segments no less enjoyable.

Part II

Whose Book is This Anyway? Am I Creator Or Biographer?

As the author of *Promised Land*, obviously I had the power to control the book’s characters and their stories by my choice of which details to include and which to omit. Nonetheless, for my own enjoyment I also wanted those stories to unfold with almost as many surprises for me as it would for the book’s readers. Thus, although I had a general idea of the overall direction in which I wanted the stories to go, individually and collectively, I made a diligent effort to limit my creative control.

I had already given myself considerable latitude for creative expression, setting each of the first seven chapters in a different country—the United States of America, Peru, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Brazil, Ireland, India, and Vietnam—and spanning the years from around 1940 to 2040. And so, I set parameters dictated by genuine necessity, and then, in effect, imagined the characters as real people telling me their stories, which I recorded as their biographer.

SETTING PARAMETERS FOR THE BOOK’S CHARACTERS AND EVENTS

The detail that limited the stories most was the ending of the book’s eighth and last chapter. According to my notes of June 18, 2001—before I began formulating even basic storylines, much less sketches of key characters—on that date I considered two different wordings for the chapter’s final line and made my decision. For those who have yet to read that chapter, I will not

be more specific about that wording than to say that it set the tone for the personalities of key characters and for certain events in the book.

Beyond the specific limitations imposed by my choice for the final line of Chapter 8, as I prepared to begin producing the narrative, I had only one general guideline for the characters and events in the individual chapters: Dysfunctional relationships would be the exception; angst and attitude would be kept to a minimum. Everyday life provides us abundant examples of human misbehavior; for reasons that I explain in Part I of this backstory, I conceived *Promised Land* to explore some of life’s more joyful possibilities, even in the midst of heartrending circumstances.

Aside from avoiding gratuitously negative behavior and events, I simply wanted the book to be a time machine of sorts, allowing me to explore a variety of cultures past, present, and future.

DRAWING FROM MY OWN MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Multicultural, multigenerational environments, such as those in *Promised Land*, are not uncommon for me. Both in my adopted home, the US, and in my birth country, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, my own life has been influenced by a broad range of cultures, not only those of the present, but very much of the past, given my native land’s African slave as well as Amerindian origins.

The Caribbean gets its name from one of its native inhabitants, the Caribs, who were pre-Columbian migrants from South America. The town of Sandy Bay, on my island’s northern coast, once had one of its largest indigenous populations; however, today most Vincentians of Carib ancestry are also of other ethnicities, mostly black. Indeed, the island of Roatan off the coast of Honduras in Central America is home to descendants of the unions of

Caribs with African slaves who had escaped to freedom in St. Vincent following a shipwreck nearby, perhaps in 1675 (some sources say 1635). Known then as Black Caribs, they were eventually relocated to Roatan by the British in 1797 and today are known also as the Garifuna.

The Spanish were the first to claim St. Vincent from the Caribs, following a visit there by Christopher Columbus in 1498. In the ensuing centuries, in addition to the British, the island was colonized by the French, whose legacy is evident in place names such as Sans Souci, Chateaubelair, and Soufriere, the island’s still active volcano.

Indentured servants, merchants, adventurers, and others have settled in St. Vincent from India, Portugal, China, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Even some of the vegetation has had notable origins in other parts of the world: the island’s botanical gardens are home to a breadfruit tree brought there in 1793 from Tahiti by none other than Captain Bligh of “Mutiny on the Bounty” notoriety. (In 1979, on a visit to Tahiti, I was astonished to discover growing there not only cultivated plants but wild flora as well identical to many on St. Vincent more than 6,000 miles away.)

Today my native land still attracts notorious adventurers, real and fictional: The “Pirates of the Caribbean” movies have been filmed in part in locations around St. Vincent.

I grew up in a neighborhood called Cane Garden, where my family moved with me and my siblings, Ashley, Joan, and Ron, when I, the youngest, was an infant. Within a stone’s throw of our house were visible reminders of my birth country’s slave era, which had ended in 1838. The neighborhood’s very name was derived from one crop that had been cultivated there in centuries past.

Directly across the street from our house was a sugar mill (which we children usually avoided, not because it was partially overgrown by vines, but because of the Jack Spaniards—wasps—that proliferated there).

On the embankment that adjoined the street directly below our house stood the fairly well preserved remains of a factory where cane from the surrounding fields likely had been processed into sugar, molasses, and rum.

In one area of our property was a large, rectangular enclosure, which probably had once served the site as a cistern. From the occasional sloshing and more frequent croaking sounds I would hear, I deduced that it still collected rainwater in some small portion of its innards. (Like the sugar mill, that area of our surroundings did not entice us as a place to play.) Once in a while, one of the few chickens that we raised would stumble into a small opening in a corner of that cistern and have to be rescued by ladder.

We were one of the first families to live in Cane Garden. For most of my childhood there were no more than five or six other homes in our immediate vicinity. Yet, before we emigrated to the US in 1964, our neighbors during those fourteen or so years were from a number of different countries: in two houses up the road, from Trinidad and Grenada; across the street, from Jamaica; and on one corner, in a house that was said to be haunted, families came and went over the years from countries as far-flung as the US and Holland, as well as from St. Vincent itself.

The year 1964 was by no means the first time that a member of my family had migrated to another country: my oldest sibling, Ashley, attended school in Grenada for several years, immigrating to England after that, as did my sister, Joan, after she completed high school. And my dad’s first journey, before he was about two years old, had been *to* St. Vincent. He was born in Panama, where many Vincentians were among those constructing the Panama Canal between

1904 and 1914; my paternal grandfather, Benjamin Samuel, was their English-speaking Anglican minister.

LETTING THE CHARACTERS TELL THEIR STORIES

From the very first chapter of the book, I relinquished considerable control of the stories to my fictional narrators, allowing them to steer the vehicle, so to speak, as long as it did not veer too far off track.

Chapter 1, the USA: One issue that was, in effect, among the first to be “resolved” by the characters themselves was the gender of Sydney, narrator of Chapter 1. The final decision hinged on whether any story seemed to work better with a narrator of a specific gender. For the sake of balance, I wanted to have no more than a four-to-three split for the genders of the individual narrators of the first seven chapters. Before I could determine whether Sydney would be male or female, I completed much of the writing for all seven of those chapters. Ultimately Chapter 1 seemed to offer the most flexibility in this regard, and so Sydney became the third male narrator.

Of necessity, initially I had written the entire chapter with no references to Sydney’s gender. Not wanting to puzzle readers unduly with that omission, I reviewed the chapter with the intention of inserting at least one gender reference. The search proved more problematic than I had anticipated; ultimately I chose to leave well enough alone, and so the first reference to Sydney’s gender does not occur until Chapter 8.

Chapter 2, Peru: Even today as I read this chapter, I feel as if I am reading Maricela Sato’s journal. Although I have never kept a diary myself, I could imagine Maricela as a teenager, especially, excitedly preserving in that way the most memorable events in her private world. And

in a sense, writing that chapter took me back to my own childhood and early adolescence, those years of innocence and budding friendships and inklings of life’s wondrous possibilities.

Chapter 3, the DRC: Though not by design, there may be more of my “DNA” in this chapter than any other. Like the chapter’s narrator, Yvette Ndugu, I have been a teacher (although my own path has been somewhat roundabout). Also like Yvette, I once pondered becoming a nun. (And like her, ultimately I recognized that my inquisitive nature might make me less than an ideal candidate for that vocation.)

I’m not sure how much my own early inclinations influenced the fact that the chapter recounts Yvette’s relationship with Catholic nuns at the convent school she attended as a child. I do know that the story was definitely influenced by the fact that, before my family moved to Cane Garden, we had lived next door to a Catholic convent and, although we were not Catholics ourselves, my siblings attended the convent school for several years. And so, I, too, vicariously shared those experiences to an extent.

Chapter 4, Brazil: I intended this chapter to be transitional, somewhat of an intermission between the first and last three chapters that have individual narrators. As such, it is purposefully shorter than the others and almost in the format of an essay, with only limited dialog. Yet, for me, writing this chapter was no less satisfying than writing any other, for I would find myself being taken along unexpected mental pathways, as passages would stream into my mind, at times forcing me to interrupt whatever else I was doing then to make hurried scribbles before other thoughts overwrote them. I also enjoyed the research, Brazil being a country that I had not previously known much about.

Chapter 5, Ireland: One of the most lasting lessons that writing this chapter illuminated for me was that even the author is not entitled to know for sure the answer to every question about a

character. This was the case with Edward and Emma: I found myself imagining him as someone who had experienced a profound disappointment about which he chose not to speak. I imagined her, his wife, once being on the verge of perhaps shedding some light on that experience, as she talked with her friend Katelynn. She stopped abruptly when Edward appeared. I felt that in real life a friend would not pursue the matter further, and Katelynn did not. Neither did I.

Chapter 6, India: Certain details of this story developed in fortuitous ways that not only did I not orchestrate, initially I did not even recognize the significance of those details. For example, Janaki eventually becomes a lawyer; Ajay becomes a computer engineer. For a while I had forgotten that those were the very careers that their older sister, Anishula, the chapter’s narrator, had rejected earlier in the chapter, pointedly thwarting their father’s ambitions for her. Nor did I anticipate, when describing Janaki’s childhood discussions with her dolls, the similarly coincidental tie-in that would occur later in the chapter, when she would use those skills on the debating team in college and as a lawyer in adulthood.

Chapter 7, Vietnam: As I explain in Part I, I chose this locale for the chapter largely because my brother Ron had done a tour of military duty there during the war. I had witnessed much of the war’s progression on television. I got an even more personal look at day-to-day life for some of the soldiers through regular correspondence with Ron. Although this was the book’s last chapter with an individual narrator, it was, intentionally, the first chapter that I completed, so that it could be the first that I shared with Ron, as I prepared the manuscript.

Complemented by research and my own more recent personal experiences, the material that I was able to draw on led me to control this chapter more directly perhaps than any other. Nonetheless, as with the other chapters, I wanted a story that could surprise me to some extent, rather than one with which I might already be relatively familiar. And so, the main character and

narrator is not any of the story’s US soldiers, but a Vietnamese whom they befriended when he was a boy.

Thankfully, Ron never served directly on the frontlines, having been assigned duty as a cook (a talent for which we who know him today are yet grateful); nevertheless, there were constant reminders of the war all around him, including the loss of comrades who were assigned to the frontlines. For much of the chapter, I chose to draw on aspects of Ron’s letters home that were not directly combat-related, such as the camaraderie among the personnel in the mess tent and elsewhere on the base.

During Ron’s tour of duty, my family tried to send him care packages as often as possible. Among the contents were usually 45-rpm records by popular R&B artists of the day (a single name was usually sufficient to identify individual performers): Supremes, Temptations, Stevie, James, Sam and Dave, Marvin, Marvin and Tammi, Marvin and Kim. And Ron’s personal favorite then as now: Aretha. I could imagine those 45s being among the musical selections young Tran heard on his first visit to the base.

I wanted the story to be as much a product of my imagination as possible, drawing on my own knowledge of the subject to lend realism to the characters and events. Aside from gleaning information from letters Ron and I had exchanged while he was overseas and perhaps conversations when he first returned to the US after his discharge in August 1968, I had never really asked him directly about his service in Vietnam. I did so after completing the first draft of this chapter.

I used some of Ron’s comments then to add realism and texture to the story; for example, the fact that tours of duty were limited to no more than one year, and that military police might accompany off-duty GI’s for their security on trips into villages off base.

Epilogue: Not only did certain portions of this section of the book seem to write themselves, I had not considered including an epilogue at all until well after I had completed Chapter 8. Indeed, I had already mailed a copy of that final chapter to my sister Joan in Hawaii (where she once again enjoys “island life,” this time with her husband, Ernie, as they cultivate coffee and macadamia nuts in the Kona region of the Big Island).

And then one day, as I stepped away from my computer and walked toward the living room, where there are two mirrors on a wall, I was unexpectedly struck by the idea that I would ultimately incorporate as the book’s final scenes. There was an almost surreal quality to those few seconds, as I so vividly imagined Maricela Sato experiencing the epiphany described in the closing paragraphs of *Promised Land*.

HAVING THE FINAL SAY

My assertions of liberal intentions toward the book’s characters notwithstanding, I did at times exercise a decidedly less-than-liberal approach to editing “their” stories. Specifically, after completing the handwritten version of the book’s first draft, recognizing that today most of us have precious little time to spare for reading or any other recreational activity, I chose to reduce *Promised Land* to no more than two-thirds of what I had produced in that first draft.

And so, for example, in Chapter 2, from the original version I pared several pages describing Tina and Nikos’ harrowing encounter with a hurricane to just a few paragraphs on a single page. In other chapters I unsentimentally excised entire segments of a character’s “biography” that I deemed nonessential to the overall storyline.

I envisioned *Promised Land* as a traveler’s companion of sorts. Each of its seven related but self-

contained short stories and the final chapter in which the storylines converge can be read completely in less than a single morning or afternoon—the equivalent of a longish roundtrip commute on public transportation or half a coast-to-coast flight within the continental US or the wait at an airport between some flights. I hope that reading this backstory is making your journey today—whether virtual or real—a little more pleasant.

Part III

Any Similarity to Real Persons... : When Fiction Anticipates Reality

There is no new thing under the sun.

Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us. (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10)

King Solomon is said to have made that observation some three thousand years ago. The passage of time has only increased the frequency with which certain events and ideas recur, yet often we assume that no one before us has ever experienced such an event or conceived such an idea. Writing *Promised Land* has made me more aware than ever of how often different people can have similar ideas. (More than 150 years ago, novelist Charles Dickens advocated for an international copyright agreement, and patents exist because two or more persons can, indeed, have the same potentially lucrative idea.)

In late 2000, when I first envisioned the concept for *Promised Land*, I had no serious intention of publishing it. By merely completing the book, in early 2002, I had accomplished my original purpose of conjuring up the characters who populate its fictional world.

For more than four years I allowed the manuscript to sit virtually abandoned. Perhaps the most compelling reason for my decision, in April 2006, to share *Promised Land* with a wider audience by publishing it at that time was the plethora of coincidental similarities that, in the intervening years, kept occurring between my imaginary characters and events and other characters and events, real and imaginary. It was simply becoming too impractical to change events, names, and other details, especially in such a book, where the interaction between those elements is so

critical to the overall story, spanning, as it does, some 100 years and most of the continents. If I was ever going to publish it, further delay seemed unwise.

THE SIMILARITIES BEGIN: ART IMITATES ART

Almost from the time that I initiated my research at the local library, around May 2001, I started recognizing the need to be extra alert to existing publications with storylines and other elements to which *Promised Land* might be regarded as similar. As I mention in Part I, the title itself was one of the first features that I checked, and I found at the time one other story with that title. Since the book’s publication, I’ve discovered that there are actually numerous books with “Promised Land” in the title.

I’ve also discovered that Africa is a very popular literary setting. Purely by chance I set Chapter 3 of *Promised Land* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, once a Belgian colony. Ironically, no other chapter in the book would generate more similarities, primarily because of that location.

By my mid-thirties, with free time increasingly becoming a luxury, I had begun to limit my reading almost exclusively to nonfiction—history, nature, current events—and to material with a more universal, rather than individual, focus. I kept abreast of developments in the literary world mostly by reading book reviews in magazines and the like.

Several months after I began working on *Promised Land*, I recalled that a year or two earlier a co-worker had mentioned enjoying *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver and, more significantly, that it was set in Africa. Especially because that work had been published fairly recently, I thought it a good idea to make sure that Chapter 3 of *Promised Land* bore no particular resemblance to it. After completing my research at the library one day, I sought out

The Poisonwood Bible. I was dismayed. It, too, was set in the Belgian Congo. After skimming a few randomly chosen pages, I was relieved to find that, beyond the common theme of religion, the stories seemed significantly different.

And then... I remembered that when I was about ten years old, I had seen the movie “The Nun’s Story”; I could recall nothing about the movie except that it had starred Audrey Hepburn and was set somewhere in Africa. I felt trepidation. I researched the movie; again I was dismayed—I saw that it was set in the Belgian Congo. And this time there were other similarities: as in *Promised Land* there were nuns, of course, as well as references to the convent at Bukavu.

Thankfully, again, as I read further, I was satisfied that the stories are significantly different. I also realized that the similarities themselves were an indication of the realism I had been able to achieve in my own story, though based solely on research and my imagination.

I ceased to be much of a moviegoer years ago, mainly because I prefer entertainment that is suitable for the entire family, and such movies were becoming too few and far between. My collection of movies on video is minuscule; it consists primarily of lighthearted fare such as the “Indiana Jones” series and “Star Wars” episodes IV, V, and VI. It once also included the first twelve or so “James Bond” movies, but after countless, thoroughly enjoyable viewings, I eventually donated those to the library.

Movie reviews allow me to identify potential new titles for my collection. In early December 2004, a review brought to my attention the movie “Hotel Rwanda.” I read that the bloody conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis are at the core of the movie; a Belgian-owned hotel is a key setting.

Once more I got that “uh-oh” feeling, because although the similarities to *Promised Land* are, ultimately, only minor, and although I had written my story some three years earlier, I

recognized the potential for my own work to seem derivative because of those similarities, should I decide to publish eventually. But, still confident that *Promised Land*'s inherent differences distinguished it from that movie as well, I was content to keep it at the manuscript stage a while longer.

Since publishing *Promised Land*, I have encountered on television yet another movie to which the book bears at least one, however fleeting (about three seconds?) resemblance. I don't know the name of the movie; it was just one of many movies spanning several decades from which mere fragments had been excerpted. But in that particular fragment, taken from a movie that seemed to have been filmed in the 1930s or 1940s, a nun waltzes across a room with a boy of about eight or nine years old. Just as a nun does in *Promised Land*. I surmised that perhaps in that movie, as in the book, the intent was to show that even nuns can be unpredictably exuberant.

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT: ART IMITATES LIFE

But those were merely movies and other books. When I began writing *Promised Land* in 2001, I could not have imagined that just a few years ahead lay a real event so similar to one I described in the manuscript that it would force me to revise segments of the book and decide once and for all whether to publish or not.

I am a skeptic. Before I accept anything as fact, I am inclined to consult at least three sources that I consider unimpeachable. As a child growing up in the Caribbean, although I would listen with rapt attention to the ghost stories that adults around me would tell, along with the Brer Anansi and similar tales attributed to my African ancestors, I could find no rational basis for actually believing in the supernatural. So, too, although I am constantly awed by nature's

wonders, I remind myself that natural phenomena such as an eclipse of the sun and even fire were once regarded as supernatural.

Setting some of *Promised Land*'s events in the future gave me the opportunity to have a little fun with my own crystal ball. Yet I did not feel very comfortable foretelling much unmitigated mayhem—however imaginary—for humankind. And so, even the more improbable events in *Promised Land* have what I consider some reasonable basis in reality. However, I am inclined to agree with the saying “Fact is stranger than fiction,” which gave me considerable latitude in determining what might be “reasonable” imitations of real life.

One of the earliest notes from my *Promised Land* file reads “Can the past—i.e., history—help us to predict the future?” I had jotted down a few real-life events throughout history, among them volcanic eruptions, plagues, wars and related atrocities, the Y2K computer bug, and scandals involving public figures. I had little doubt that anything I might imagine would not be more incredible or tragic than events humans have actually witnessed.

In the years since writing *Promised Land*, each time that I would hear of an actual event that was reminiscent of something in the book or an event that I had chosen to omit before finalizing the manuscript (such as Earth's relatively close encounter with the asteroid dubbed 2001 YB5 or civilians paying \$20 million to accompany astronauts into space), I would be surprised at how predictable life can sometimes be. Even so, I also realized that each real-life event, in effect, validated the realism of what I had concocted.

Clearly the most likely explanation for such similarities is coincidence or simple deductive reasoning, rather than any predictive ability on my part. Yet I must also acknowledge a certain relish when a reader uses words such as “prophetic” or “visionary” in commenting on such a similarity in *Promised Land*.

However, one coincidental similarity in particular warranted a serious reaction on my part. As published in April 2006, the book describes an asteroid’s crash to Earth in 2020 that results in thousands of deaths in several countries in the vicinity of the Arctic Circle. In the original manuscript, the location I had chosen for the asteroid’s crash was the Indian Ocean, resulting in millions of tsunami-related deaths in Indonesia and elsewhere in that region. When a real tsunami devastated Indonesia and several other countries in that very area on December 26, 2004, nothing less than a significant revision of the affected chapters seemed appropriate.

ANOTHER AUTHOR WRITES MY BIOGRAPHY, SORT OF

Over the years, I have studied, to varying degrees, a few languages beyond my native English, primarily to gain a sense of empathy with persons from cultures where those languages predominate. To achieve realism in the personalities and experiences of the fictional characters in *Promised Land*, I relied on a combination of extensive research and my own multicultural background, including study of other languages.

The realism that I was able to achieve with certain characters and events proved somewhat unnerving to me at times. Even as I was still finalizing some of the chapters, I would hear total strangers describe details of their lives that, usually because of the culture they were from, were virtually identical to details of the fictional lives of one or more characters in the book with a similar cultural background, details as ordinary as a family name, a birthplace, schools attended, a college major, the make of car the person drives.

Part I describes how I selected names for the book’s characters. In Part II I mention that I consciously avoided giving any character the same name as that of someone I knew personally or

indirectly, using such a name only if it was ideal for the character, coincidental similarity notwithstanding. It has been interesting to discover that some readers who know me personally have detected similarities that I myself had not noticed, and which were, in fact, unintentional.

And even I only recently recognized such a similarity from my distant past. My first crush—I was perhaps nine years old at the time—was Mario, an “older man” from Venezuela who was visiting neighbors. He was about thirteen years old. My parents invited him on a family outing to the country one day; he strummed his guitar as we drove along the winding, narrow roads. Mario threw up in both directions of the journey; his mishap made him no less attractive to me. To readers who might wonder, it is pure coincidence that a character in Chapter 4 of *Promised Land*, set in Brazil, is also named Mario. Honest.

All of these coincidences led me to devise an experiment: To select a work of fiction by another author and see how many similarities occurred between that work and my own life. My random choice was *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott, published in 1868. The first few paragraphs introduce us to the March family: Mother, Father, and four siblings—Jo, the bookworm; Meg, the teacher; Beth, the musician; and “little Amy,” the aspiring artist. The children mention the King family.

In those few paragraphs alone there are numerous similarities with my own family: My mother was named for the month she was born, May (an Alcott family name as well). There are also four siblings in my family (although the first and third are boys), including Joan, whom my parents especially would sometimes call Jo, and the youngest, “little Anne”—me, a bookworm and future teacher, and in childhood an aspiring artist (as well as a piano student—though not a particularly enthusiastic or accomplished one). My maternal grandmother’s name was Margaret (of which Meg is a shortened version). And our next door neighbors? The King family. My

curiosity had been well satisfied; I needed no further comparisons.

NOSTRADAMUS I’M NOT

Unlike that sixteenth century French physician and royal astrologer, still regarded by many today as a prophet for all times, I lay no claim to visions of future events: I wrote *Promised Land* as entertainment for myself, and share it now with others for that same purpose. If readers’ enjoyment of *Promised Land* is enhanced by the possibility that an event described in the book as occurring at some future date may actually happen in real life, I’m even more delighted.

I will admit that I have surprised myself more than once when something I offhandedly predicted in jest actually came to pass. (For example, the Washington Redskins’ 27-17 victory over the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl XVII in 1983, which almost rekindled my enthusiasm for the sport following the departure of my beloved Oakland Raiders to Los Angeles a couple years earlier.) However, should any fictional event described in the book actually become reality, I would probably abandon forever even such jesting “prophecies.” Or at least limit myself to only happy outcomes.

One particular event that did not make it into the published version of the book is noteworthy because of certain recent developments. That event was television coverage of the results of the 2012 United States presidential election as anchored on CBS by... Dan Rather. Given Mr. Rather’s unexpected retirement in March 2005, one year before his twenty-fifth anniversary as anchor of the network’s evening news, and his outright departure from the network in 2006 after forty-four years overall there, the odds of *that* prediction ever becoming reality seem slim indeed. Oops.

CHOOSING A COVER

Although I already had two designs of my own as possibilities for the cover of *Promised Land*, ultimately I chose one from among several in the publisher’s offerings. That cover, with its reddish sand dunes beneath cloudless blue skies, is a perfect visual representation of key aspects of the book itself.

In August 2006, some four months after the book was published, as I conducted completely unrelated research, an image caught my eye: Just one inch square, it depicted reddish sand dunes beneath cloudless blue skies in the Namib Desert in Namibia. I zoomed in. The image was virtually identical to the book’s cover. It was a goose bump moment. I was awed by the realization that I had unknowingly chosen a scene from the continent of my African ancestors (although they were more likely from either Ghana or Nigeria—perhaps Ashanti or Fulani, as I recall from a high school history class).

When I first embarked on the literary journey that has culminated in the publication of *Promised Land*, I never imagined that reality and fiction could intersect in so many unexpected and varied ways. That discovery has helped to make the experience even more satisfying for me.

To the readers of this backstory, I hope that your enjoyment of the book itself is enhanced by this behind-the-scenes peek, just as writing it has afforded me yet another joyous opportunity to revisit old neighborhoods and friends, fictional and real.