

READER'S GUIDE



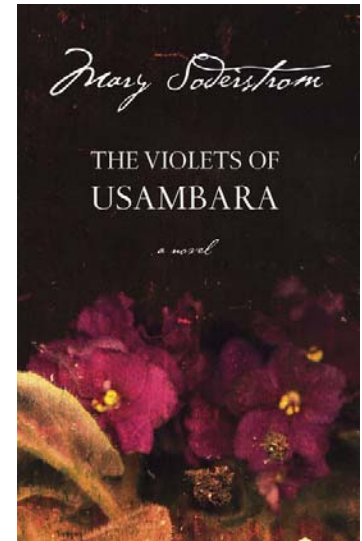
The Violets of Usambara by Mary Soderstrom

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INTRODUCING *The Violets of Usambara*

Bujumbura, Burundi is one of the last places you would expect to find Thomas Brossard. Once a powerful cabinet minister in Brian Mulroney's Conservative government, Thomas never had a particular interest in the continent of Africa and the concerns it represented. That was his wife Louise's domain. But, after an embarrassing election loss, Thomas will do just about anything to regain political power and improve his wife's estimation of him.

Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, the Brossards didn't have much to worry about; they raised a prosperous Québécois family, as might be expected of a successful cabinet minister. But, with Thomas's electoral defeat, the world outside their home becomes less inviting. After Thomas's ill-fated run for mayor of Montreal leaves him a failure, he attempts to overcome his lack of success with the help of Louise, who finds a Catholic charity in need of a political figure to investigate their projects in Africa. When Thomas disappears in war-stricken Burundi on his fact-finding mission, Louise becomes trapped inside their house in Montreal by her own fears; she is left to fret about her continually blurring past, piecing together how she has reached this sudden point of loneliness and isolation.



In a story spanning decades, the past peeks through the seams and enriches the novel with a deep history of Quebec's wealthy and political classes. Mary Soderstrom's story thrums with tension and excitement, but also reaches deep into literary tradition, illuminating character and emotion through an engaging plot.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Loyalty

Throughout the novel, the theme of loyalty continually arises in everything from marriage to politics to friendship. However, loyalty in the novel is not straightforward. Thomas is repeatedly shown as being sexually unfaithful to Louise, yet he is adamant that he is loyal to her. Louise is also ambiguous about her loyalty to her friend Rosa, often shopping at other groceries, despite the fact that she knows her patronage helps Rosa survive. This ambivalence to strict loyalty does not belie the fact, however, that both Louise and Thomas remain dear to each other and to their friends.

Fear

Fear is a dominant theme in the novel. It is fear that keeps Louise sheltered from the outside world — afraid of what people will think or say about her — and it is a lack of fear that draws Thomas to his death in Burundi. Their fears are mirrored in each other in the scene when they must cross the border into Canada. Here, it is Thomas who is afraid and Louise the strong, willful one.

Q&A WITH MARY SODERSTROM

1. You actually spent some time in Burundi to research this novel. Can you explain how your experiences there translated onto the page and where your initial inspiration for the story came from?

Before I went to Burundi I had already written a story about a Canadian politician who goes missing there. In fact, it was on the strength of it that the Conseil des arts et lettres du Québec gave me a generous grant to start writing the novel. Published in 1999 in *The North American Review*, the story was almost all invention, although the character of Thomas Brossard was one who had fascinated me for a long time. In a sort of groping way, I wanted to look at what made him tick, as well as try to understand the horrible bloodbath in Rwanda. Before I started writing the short story I did a lot of research, and one of the things I learned was that Rwanda is only one part of Ruanda-Urundi, an area in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa. Its non-identical twin is Burundi. This part of Africa had not been drastically touched by the slave trade and was conquered by the Germans only at the end of the 19th century. It became a Belgian protectorate after WWI and both countries, the Republic of Rwanda and the Kingdom of Burundi, gained their independence in 1962.

When I wrote the short story, I'd seen two tropical places — Singapore and Haiti — so that was the background I had in mind when I wrote it. When I got to Burundi, I discovered that I had imagined some things right, but got the physical setting wrong: Burundi is at a relatively high altitude, and not nearly as hot as Port au Prince. I also did not understand the dignity of the people, or their immense hospitality. The country was inching toward a new power-sharing agreement between Hutus and Tutsis and things were relatively calm, although inter-ethnic conflict had been going on in Burundi for as long as it had in Rwanda. I had to incorporate that into the story, also.

On the same trip, I also visited Tanzania, spending some time in the Amani Nature Reserve in the East Usambara Mountains. There, I saw a country whose experience since independence has been quite different — much more peaceful, and in some respects much less manipulated by Europe and North America. This part of my trip made me reflect a lot more on the legacy of colonialism and the slave trade. Those reflections show up in the novel — and also in a non-fiction book, *Green City: People, Nature and Urban Places* (Véhicule, 2006) which has a chapter about Tanga, Tanzania.

2. What sort of struggles did you have to deal with in writing this book? How did this book in particular alter your craft?

Where to begin? It's only taken me about ten years to get it right. Part of the problem came from trying to explode a short story — I knew the beginning and the end, but all the rest had to be re-invented. Parts of the short story are still in the novel, as are long passages that I wrote shortly after my return from Africa. Discovering how to portray Louise and her complex, do-gooding character took the longest, I guess.

This novel is the second one in which I deal with the relationship between a political man and his wife, only the dynamic in the couple is reversed. *The Words on the Wall: Robert Nelson and the Rebellion of 1837* (Oberon, 1999) is a fictionalized biography of a Lower Canadian patriot in the nearest thing to a revolution Canada ever had. Robert Nelson married an English woman who was apparently, in principle, keen on the cause, but in practice, hated the political life. Louise is like her only strength of character.

One thing for sure, the next novel I write will not have so fixed a framework at the beginning. Right now, all I see is a woman on a terrace who has a lover, a telephone lineman, and what happens next is yet to be determined!



ABOUT MARY

Mary Soderstrom was born and raised on the west coast of the United States, but moved to Montreal as a young woman. She is the author of nine previous works of fiction and non-fiction, including the Books in Canada First Novel Award finalist *The Descent of Andrew McPherson*, as well as *Endangered Species*, *Finding the Enemy*, and her most recent novel, *After Surfing Ocean Beach*. She currently lives in Montreal with her husband.

3. Louise, despite coming from a wealthy, sheltered background, is anything but naïve and repressed. What is it about her character that makes her such a strong, independent, and willful person?

If Louise had been ten or fifteen years younger, she would have done something like take political science, get at least a master's degree and go into the Canadian Foreign Service. But women of her background were just beginning to do things like that in North America. Instead, she was doing teacher-training when she met Thomas, and found herself to be a wife and mother in her early 20s. Her intelligence and ambition had to find an outlet, and Thomas's career presented itself at the moment when she might have started thinking about going back to school. She made a calculation (perhaps unconscious) that she would have more effect on the world working through him and her charities than trying to change it herself.

4. To continue with the thread of questioning from above, Louise is also agoraphobic. How does this alter, yet not diminish her strength?

She can be audacious for others because she never has to put herself on the line. She pulls the strings when it comes to Thomas's career for a long time, and she has ambitions for him that initially he would not have had for himself. The key to understanding Louise is in her relationship to African violets, her *violettes d'Usambara*. She loves their beauty, and the escape that caring for them gives her, but most of all she likes playing God with them.

5. Were there any specific books or movies that inspired you while writing the novel?

Not that I can think of, although I did read Gil Courtemanche's *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* when I was beginning work on it in 1998 or 1999, as well as Graham Greene's *The Comedians*; the former because it is about the genocide in Rwanda, and the latter because it tells of missionaries in a third world country (Haiti). Somewhere along the way I also reread *The Poisonwood Bible*, but that was really more useful in trying to write the novel before this one, *After Surfing Ocean Beach*, because I was working with first person narrative for the first time in it.

6. Thomas starts, and continues, his political career as a Conservative out of convenience rather than choice, but he becomes very successful and enthusiastic about his adopted political stance. How does this adoption of politics alter his character and how does his character alter the politics in the novel as a whole?

His political adventure starts as a lark, but I'm not inventing anything here. I was active in a political party for about ten years in the 1980s and 1990s, and I saw how companies like Bell encouraged employees to run for all parties, and how landslides can sweep the most peculiar candidates into office. The first Mulroney mandate was seriously embarrassed by some of the people they elected in Quebec because, when the writs were dropped, they had to scramble to find candidates. Things changed suddenly (René Lévesque's decision to support Mulroney tacitly, "le beau risqué," had tremendous impact) and so some real dunces were elected. In fact, because Thomas is far from a dunce, he shone in the group of MPs elected from Quebec, and so he got a good cabinet post. He did a good job, too. But then he was seduced by power. I don't talk very much about this, except to say how after the 1993 defeat, he missed the excitement of a crowd (there is nothing like it!) and as time went on, he began to leave the details to other people. This is very dangerous in politics, as it is in real life — you have to strike a balance between micro-managing and being lazy.

7. Out of all of the characters in the book, who has changed you the most?

Change me? No, I change them.

8. Montreal plays a major role in the novel as a character of its own. After living for so long in Montreal, did it seem natural writing about your home and your community, or was there a struggle putting into words something you know instinctually?

What's the writing class adage? "Write about what you know." Here I write about the place where I've lived almost all my adult life, telling the stories of people whom I don't think have been written about in English (nor in French, but that's another matter). But a good half of this book happens in Burundi, which was about as exotic as it could be for me when I went there.

9. What do you hope readers will take from this novel?

Some enjoyment in a good story, as well as food for thought about a whole range of subjects — democracy, the relation between races, justice, what is involved on the private level in living a decent life, men and women, love and pain, and the whole damn thing.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss Louise's fears and where they could have originated from.
2. The novel follows two distinct perspectives — Thomas's and Louise's. How does the narrative voice switch for each of them, and how does this switch affect the story?
3. The novel is set in Montreal and Burundi, Africa. What kind of symbols in the novel relate to these two disparate settings?
4. Discuss the similarities and differences between each of the relationships in the novel — Thomas and Louise, Manny and Rosa, and Louise and Frederic.
5. What are Thomas's motivations for going to Burundi?
6. Discuss the politics portrayed in the book and compare the differences between the practices shown in Canada and Burundi.
7. Discuss the role men play in the novel. How do these men affect Louise?
8. How do Louise and Thomas each contend with identity in the novel?
9. How does Louise directly affect Rosa and her family?
10. Thomas was never sexually loyal to Louise, yet he insists that he is doggedly loyal to her as his wife, and Louise seems able to accept this. How is this a reflection on both of their characters?