

Excerpts from **Albert Russo's biography** penned by **Adam Donaldson Powell**
UNDER THE SHIRTTAILS OF ALBERT RUSSO

ALBERT RUSSO: from the soul of Africa

JAMES BALDWIN: "Dear Albert Russo: I've read everything you sent me, and I like your work very much indeed. It has a very gentle surface and a savage under-tow - the fiction - and I applaud the wicked portrait of Ionesco. You're a dangerous man. My friend, the Black woman novelist, Toni Morrison, knows what you are talking about."

These illustrious words by the acclaimed literary giant James Baldwin were written to Albert Russo, in a letter in 1987, just before he died, regarding "Mixed Blood" and other works. The complete letter follows at the end of this chapter.

Mr. Russo's novels based on life and events on the continent of Africa are amongst his most celebrated works, and truly represent his first leap into literary excellence. These works include: "La Pointe du Diable", "Mixed Blood" and "The African Quatuor".

"La Pointe du Diable", Russo's anti-apartheid novel which was based on a true story and was subsequently banned in South Africa, was originally published by Pierre Deméyère (Brussels) in 1972, and re-published in 1992 by Ginkgo (Paris) in 1992 with the title "Le Cap des Illusions".

"Mixed Blood", originally published by Domhan Books (USA), is a novel based upon true facts about an American homosexual who lived with a Congolese 'governess', and who adopted a child of 'mixed blood'. It was later republished as "Adopted by an American Homosexual in the Belgian Congo" by l'Aleph (Sweden) in 2014 (see following paragraph). Prior to the English-language versions, the novel was first published in French as "Sang Mêlé" by Editions du Griot (Paris) in 1990. This popular book was later re-published by France's major book club France Loisirs, and then yet again by Ginkgo Éditeur (Paris).

"The African Quatuor", which includes "Adopted by an American Homosexual in the Belgian Congo" (formerly "Mixed Blood"), "Leodine of the Belgian Congo", "Eur-African Exiles", and "Eclipse over Lake Tanganyika", was published in English by l'Aleph (Sweden) - both as e-books and as separate paperbacks - in 2014. Each of these four novels deals with the three African countries under Belgian rule, and during the post-colonial period: the present DRC (Congo Kinshasa / Zaire), Rwanda

and Burundi. “Eur-African Exiles” also deals with Rhodesia / Zimbabwe and South Africa, during and after apartheid. All of these individual novels had been previously published by Domhan Books (USA), and then by Imago Press (USA). The French versions of these novels initially appeared in France as individual books: “Sang Mêle”, “Eclipse sur le Lac Tanganyika”, “L’Ancêtre Noire” (later re-published with the title “Léodine L’Africaine”), and “Exils Africains”.

Albert Russo is a multilingual author, writing his original works and literary adaptations in English, French and Italian. It should be noted that while he started writing poetry, stories and essays in English (while studying Business Administration at New York University in 1963) in North America, the United Kingdom and other continents, his first published books were in French.

A popular adage in creative writing is: “Write what you know about”. Without opening up a hornet’s nest regarding this and other so-called “cardinal rules of writing”, it is likely most obvious to readers of Albert Russo’s novels based in Africa that he knows his subject, does massive research and also possesses tremendous ingenuity in elaborating and embellishing factual incidences into glorious literary expositions - which are both captivating, entertaining and informative. This talent cannot be easily taught in creative writing classes or at universities. It requires an active fantasy as well as the ability to fill in the blanks in stories from the news and personal life history, as well as to create a painterly background with details of the environment, history, politics, flora, fauna, foods, sounds, smells and much more. Albert Russo’s novels - especially the ones based on events in Africa - are rich in such descriptive imagery, and they provide every bit of visual and sensorial entertainment as a film or series of photographs.

Albert Russo’s first creative expression form was - in fact - photography, and he has taken photographs since he was a young lad. He received his first camera (a Kodak box camera) in 1955, and has published over 55 art photography books with exposés from his travels to exotic places all over the world. Among the awards received for photography books are: Indie Excellence Awards, The Gallery Fotografica Award (Silver medal), and the London Book Festival Awards. In addition, his photos have been exhibited at the Museum of Photography (Lausanne, Switzerland), in the Musée du Louvre, at the Espace Cardin, both in Paris, at Times Square (New York City), whilst his two photography books on Paris and New York have been lauded by Michael Bloomberg (previous Mayor of New York City).

However, the greatest inspiration and tool for Albert Russo's writing was and is his own uncanny ability to constantly co-interact both visually and conceptually with his surroundings, all the while linking fact and fiction inside his mind, and archiving this rich *mélange* of imagery together with his own experiences of mundane conversations and events suddenly brought to life - until the intensity of it all bubbles and brims over to a literary volcanic eruption which gives birth to both a sense of overall completion as well as inciting in the reader a desire to read, smell, see and hear ever more. In short, Albert Russo is a master of story-telling, armed with a poet's tongue and the eyes of a photographer.

But how does Africa fit into his life and literature? Albert Russo's life story is as exciting as his novels. He was born in Kamina, province of Katanga (Belgian Congo) in 1943, to an Italian Sephardic father (from Rhodes) and a British mother (who had grown up in Rhodesia). He and his family resided in Congo, Ruanda-Urundi and Rhodesia for seventeen years, during which time Albert also traveled often to South Africa. He graduated from high school in Bujumbura, Burundi (Athénée Royal Interracial) on the northeastern shore of Lake Tanganyika. By then he was already multilingual: speaking French, English, Dutch and German (and vernacular Swahili). His many years residing and traveling on the African continent provided Russo with much more than mere local stories to tell. His own family background and social position in a colonized Africa slowly moving towards independence and coupled with his own thirst and hunger to discover and experience "the soul of Africa" has given way to a plethora of perspectives of historical and literary value, which might otherwise have been lost in the axis of time and change. Albert Russo IS African. Albert Russo IS of "mixed blood", because blood does not only run in arteries and veins but in the social, cultural and creative DNA as well.

Let us take a closer look at "Mixed Blood" ("Sang Mêle") and the influences and events in Albert Russo's life which created this fantastic story that has been published and re-published many times by various publishing houses on two continents.

I first read "Mixed Blood" ("Adopted by an American Homosexual in the Belgian Congo") several years ago. Now, upon re-reading the work I am struck by the notion that the book is actually about identity. The shock of the titled themes "mixed blood" and "adoption by an American homosexual" - no less in the Belgian Congo - in contemporary Western first-world society now seems lessened by social change and human progress. Yes, while we have not come as far as many might wish, we have certainly come quite a way since post-WW2 and the year in which this novel was first published in France (1990). Of course, all literature and art must be seen at least

partially in the contexts of the social and political contexts of its era. In that regard, the book was certainly rather shocking. But what about the more universal concepts and ideas that transcend epochs? The book does indeed deliver in a larger time frame as well - through the pervading and underlying universal theme of search for identity in a great sea of currents and elements (natural and not) which lead us, hinder us, and ultimately contribute to our self-definition and the ways in which we shape our lives ... sometimes by way of our choices, and at other times in response to survival (eg. physically, mentally, socially and spiritually). We are all essentially co-creators of our states of mind and being, and always on the lookout for guidance, agreement and support for our ideas and choices. That guidance can come from various sources: religion, laws and regulations imposed by authorities, the media, families, friends and other social groups and institutions ... and authors and artists. The latter can oftentimes see themselves as on the front lines in the war of minds. Sometimes as teachers and propagandists, but more often taking on the burden of encouraging and provoking the public to use their minds in expanded ways, to continue developing, and to become more accepting of one's own need to live and think more creatively and with fewer restrictions and personal boundaries. This vital and sometimes "dangerous" role as a *provocateur* requires courage and the willingness to confront one's own perceived limitations. This because in order to inspire introspection in others an author/artist must identify with humanity in ways that are believable and convincing. This is one of Albert Russo's greatest strengths as an author. In all of his books he creates a mysterious mélange of personality confluences and interconnections, stories within stories, voices becoming other voices, and historical references that retain their relevances across decades and centuries.

In "Mixed Blood" there is an abrupt change of "first-person dialoguers", eg. from Léo the son, and then halfway through the book to his father as he reads and reacts to a letter from Léo. At first reading, this literary mechanism might seem to be a simplified way of showing generational voices. In fact, I suspect that there was much more going on in the mind of Albert Russo when he penned this work. It is logical that by using the first-person the author is perhaps freer to become Léopold — more directly and more freely — while accessing his own experiences from life. Russo has a child's genius when it comes to being inquisitive and at the same time omniscient, often noticing and dwelling upon small quirks that adults try to ignore but which children (rightly so) find quite significant, eg. the twitching of a person's Adams' apple. By writing as Léo in the first-person (just as he writes as Zapinette in several books in a later series) he is thus free to re-access these memories and fascinations that most of us dismiss and forget as we get older.

Russo's employment of stories within stories (eg. Mama Malkia's folktale, which adds an important psychological layer to an otherwise mundane relationship between herself, Harry and Léo), and his juxtapositions of other less significant stories within the main story, all serve to give the book great depth and a wider net range in which to capture and maintain readers' interest. At times these well-written sub-plots function as short stories in their own right.

And then there are many underlying sub-themes which are mentioned briefly but in contexts which make them larger than life and utterly spell-binding, such as when a cut diamond is turned slightly to capture life from a different angle. These include, among others, American fascination with a perhaps glorified vision of Africa, Africans' identification and sympathies with American Blacks not feeling free, homosexuality/pederasty, Blacks vs. Arabs, Blacks' sympathy for Jews, African local culture vs. Christian institutions and morality, witch medicine vs. European medicine etc.

I have asked Mr. Russo to write me regarding many of these thoughts and questions, and also to explain the appeal of this book then, and now. This is his rather candid response:

I have asked Mr. Russo to write me regarding many of these thoughts and questions, and also to explain the appeal of this book then, and now. This is his rather candid response:

I finished writing MIXED BLOOD, my first major African novel, in the Summer of 1986, and sent it immediately to James Baldwin, whom I met soon thereafter, for he had liked it very much. While in Paris we had dinner together and I accompanied him to a private showing of the film 'Lady sings the Blues' (Billie Holiday), of which, he had already penned a scathing review in America. He then kindly invited me to St. Paul de Vence in southern France, but unfortunately he died at the end of 1987, and it was too late. My second stay in the USA after Stonewall (not while I was studying there during Kennedy's presidency) has probably influenced me to tackle the subject of homosexuality, which I had never done before.

I wrote the novel first in English and had won the Best Fiction Award by Volcano Review in California for the whole first part. Then I showed the English novel to Robert Cornevin, the president of ADELFI (association of French-speaking writers) who told me that I absolutely had to translate it into French, so I rewrote and adapted it almost verbatim - you do know that I NEVER translate my books from English into French and vice-versa, I rewrite them, changing all the typical expressions of

language A, as well as certain 'images', which I deem untranslatable. Professional translators are not allowed to do what I do. In certain cases, as in 'I-sraeli Syndrome', the English text is much more erotic than the French one, so yes, in some cases, there are additions. I feel freer to express myself in English than in French. 'Ambiance oblige'. When the first French edition came out it was both a critical and a commercial success - all is relative -, but that is the book with which my literary career was launched in the French-speaking world.

The Black-American struggle had a definite impact on my writing. Not only because I have lived in the United States for a total duration of 8 years, two decades apart, but because I was born and grew up in an African colony, where there was racial discrimination. I had read quite a few white and African-American writers and was well aware of the history of racism in North America. Yet, if I had to publish the same novel for the 4th or 5th time today, I wouldn't change a word, because I deem that my story is still valid today, maybe not contemporary in Scandinavia or in Holland, but definitely in France - and here, I don't even mention the countries where you get jailed or, worse, decapitated if you are openly homosexual -: even though marriage between partners of the same sex is allowed, there are still millions of people demonstrating every year against that law and against same-sex couples having children. Homophobia hasn't disappeared, and especially not in the French provinces. There are many more gay youths committing suicide than heterosexual teenagers. And something I never heard proffered out loud in the Belgian Congo (yes some of the people were hypocritical all right, but they never dared express those insults publicly) such as Sales Pédés, "on te fera la peau", which so many young Muslims shout in the streets when they happen to see two men holding hands. The irony of it all is that in Muslim countries homosexuality seems to be the norm (but you must never mention it). I know, I have been to the Maghreb countries and to Turkey many times. It seems paradoxical, but in my novel, i.e., in the Belgian Congo, gay people were not menaced as they are today. Of course, they were much more discreet too. That may also be the reason.

I often use the first person vs the third person in my novels in order to better identify with the protagonist and with the other main characters: I am that character and feel freer to delve into his or her anima.

Since the very beginning of my 'career' I have liked to include foreign words and expressions. Actually, I'm an African gifted with a number of languages, each language, being a planet in its own right. Africans have a natural gift for languages. Not only do they speak their own dialect, but they also speak one of the continent's

main languages like Swahili, plus the colonialist's lingua franca: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese ... Example: in Burundi, they speak Kirundi, Swahili and French; and those who go to university add English as well into their curriculum. This gift for languages was totally ignored during the colonial period! In France I've often been told that I have no roots. My answer: You are wrong. Compare me to that tropical aquatic plant whose roots develop out of the water (yes, indeed, upside down - ask a botanist and s/he will give you the latin name for this plant / tree). In America that wasn't a problem. Only the French are Cartesian to the point of being intolerant.

Please note, dear readers, that from now on I shall use my own neologism 's/he' instead of 'he or she'.

These are the themes that contributed to the success of this book: homosexuality, racial and cultural differences, plus the colonial and post-colonial era. I must insist on this: I went to Senegal (West Africa) about seven years ago and found the very same atmosphere, with the exception that the country was independent and that they had computers and mobile phones. But in the countryside, I felt exactly the way I felt when I was a teenager in the Belgian Congo and in Rwanda-Urundi. With the major difference that now we were on an equal footing. But all the other problems remained the same.

I'd like to point out the fact that I am not, nor have I ever been a gay militant. I'm just an author like many of my better peers, since I write all kinds of stories, stories which have nothing to do with gay themes. My family read all my novels and they knew very well who I was, my mother, sisters, children and now grand-children. They accept me with no questions asked, as well as my partner of 25 years, Bernard, whom they all like very much.

I never liked labels, and that is because of French intolerance: to them I am not an African, since I am not Black. The fact that I write in several languages, disturbs them and they - the big publishers - prefer to ignore me. What is this Albert Russo, they ask, who's lived in Africa, then in America, then in Italy and who speaks French like a Frenchman? He is 'nothing', has no roots. In other words, in their eyes I'm a bastard - in the sense that I am too 'mixed'; they might add, 'too mixed-up'.

"Mixed Blood" has always been very well received in Africa/the Congo, and this hasn't changed. Actually all my African books are being studied at the University of Lubumbashi (formerly Elisabethville) and probably in the other major Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian universities, both in the History and the Literature departments. That makes me very proud. My English versions are also read in

Ghana, Nigeria, where Chinua Achebe published some excerpts in his own magazine, and in South Africa, where Zulu Zapinette was also published, not long ago.

I have been asked if I intended this story to be a novel. No, I never plan anything. I started writing and this book became a novel.

Robert Cornevin, of whom I spoke earlier read the original English manuscript and he enthusiastically prompted me to write a French version, which then became a success. Don't ask me how or why it was first published as a book in French. Publishers worldwide - and here I include the 'big' American and British publishers - are irrational, they can even be commercially wrong, but they will never admit it. A bon entendeur salut!

I've also been asked how long it took me to write this novel. I'm a slow writer: I need a whole year for a book of 180 to 250 pages.

When I started writing "Mixed Blood" there was no Internet. I did a lot of research, the old way. I have read maybe 100+ books on African History, mores, tribal life, oral and written literature, pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods. I have read well-written and balanced books, as well as very badly-researched books, especially by Anglo-Saxon so-called renowned experts, who are terribly biased, even today, especially where Belgian rule in Africa is concerned. They insist on the personal and often ruthless rule of Léopold II, who used foreign, British, French and Belgian mercenaries, but also Stanley, the Welsh-American explorer-reporter, who drew the map of what is today the RD Congo, and whom many contemporary Africans are thankful for, in spite of some of his cruel deeds. After the 'international scandal' the British launched, Léopold II cast aside his 'private' property like a hot rod to the Belgian Parliament, which never wanted a colony in the first place. The British, and consequently the Americans actually put a cross on the most important period, going from 1908 to 1960 - that is when that huge territory, the size of Western Europe, 80 times larger than the new 'mother country', became the Belgian Congo, and when the Belgians began to 'repair' some of the worst aspects inherited by a king they never liked, making of it a 'model colony', with all its bad sides: segregation, white superiority complex, and the positive ones: Africans had the best health service of any colony and free primary schooling was compulsory. They also built the best transportation network: more than 6500 kms of railways, 125,000 kms of roads, a small portion of it being asphalted, the best aviation network of the continent, except for South Africa - all but destroyed nowadays.

Belgium HAD to grant independence to a territory that was not ready for it - blame the major powers of yore: the US, the Soviet Union, China, France, Britain, and what was then called the Third World, including India, Egypt, the 'freed' North African nations, which forced a puzzled Belgium to subject its colony to the greatest bidders. Actually they helped throw that wonderful giant and very advanced 'colony' to the dogs, scaring away the Belgian functionaries, until the whole magnificent infrastructure collapsed.

NOTE: unlike the North Africans who continue to blame France for its colonial past, the Congolese, Rwandans and Burundians are usually on excellent terms with the Belgians. The Congolese still call them their 'uncles'; an endearing word. In Belgium nowadays, the tens of thousands of Black Africans live and work in harmony with the Belgians - My beloved mother had three African nurses, or better said, dames de compagnie, during the seven years of her illness, who became our dearest friends - which is NOT the case with many immigrants of Moroccan origin. Brussels has become the capital of Islamic terrorism of Europe. And yet, Belgium never colonized Morocco; France did. Explain that to me!

After the success of my African books I was pigeonholed as an African storyteller, especially In France and in Belgium, but not in the English-speaking world. The French publishers of my African novels refused to publish my "Zapinette series" or my short-stories in French. I had to look for other small and middle-sized publishers for the latter. The owner of Ginkgo, in Paris, for instance, tells me that "Zapinette" has nothing to do with Albert Russo!!!

I write my own adaptations in French and English. It is mostly a work of transliteration and of re-writing. I can assure you that it takes as much time as writing my original novel.

"MIXED BLOOD" was the original title of the novel, but, le marketing oblige, my new publisher suggested that I change the title, and I did, naming it "ADOPTED BY AN AMERICAN HOMOSEXUAL IN THE BELGIAN CONGO (AAHBC)"; and even though it has a 'tabloid' sounding title, I am quite satisfied with it. I want to reach more readers and this is what is important. Actually, the title "MIXED BLOOD", which is a good title, is too limited in scope, and furthermore, I have discovered in the meantime that a thriller written much earlier had the same title. AAHBC belongs to me... and to me alone.

Unlike many American or British authors, I write short novels. I don't like to drag on and on, like my Anglo-Saxon peers do, to the point of discouraging me from reading

their 400+ page long novels when I reach page 150. Yet, when I am interested, I can read up to 1000+ page books of history, sociology, psychology, science (made easy) books. While I am and will always remain an Agnostic, I have about 20 Bibles of all denominations in 5 languages, as well as archaeological books related to the Bible. To me, the Bible, mainly the Torah, which covers 3/4 of the Christian Bible is the world's first extraordinary Encyclopaedia, with legends, exciting stories, short and long poems, psalms, half truths, and proven facts. I read parts of it regularly ... as I read Shakespeare.

I believe that large conventional Anglo-Saxon publishers think that my novels are too short for saleability. That is why I have small publishers for my works in English: they stress quality over quantity. But here again, Random House et al, could make bestsellers out of each one of my novels that form my AFRICAN QUATUOR. Maybe one day a commercial CEO - aren't they now those who decide which novel will be published or not, instead of the literary editors? - will understand that they have missed out on something, or maybe not. So no, it's not about the economy, Stupid, it's all about the lack of perception. To conclude this subject, I am thankful for the Internet, which has lent my books a second and even a third life.