



Le Pain de Chez Nous

*Little Sisters of the Assumption
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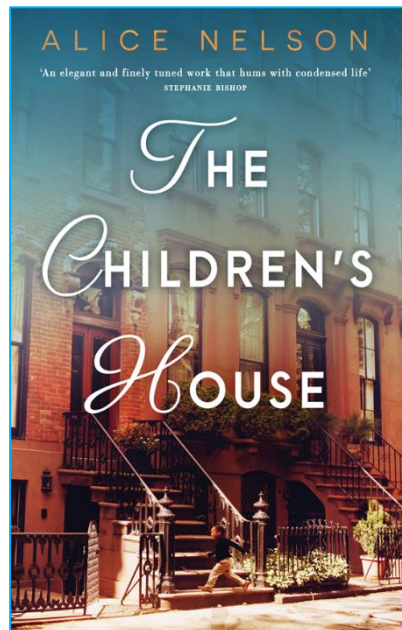


USA: Expanding Empathy - the Power of Storytelling

Alice Nelson, lived and worked with the Little Sisters in East Harlem for one year. In this article she shares the life-changing impact of her experience and, as an author who is quickly becoming recognized in Australia and beyond, she hopes her novel will shed some light on the harsh realities encountered by refugees and sensitize the reader to their plight. More information about Alice can be found at www.alicenelson.com.au

My novel, *The Children's House*, was released into the world late last year and when I am giving talks or readings from the novel, people often ask me where I drew my inspiration from – what experiences from my own life led me to write a novel that is about the dispossessed, the marginalised, refugees, migrants and Catholic nuns.

When I'm asked these questions I often talk to audiences about my time working as a Client Advocate for the Little Sisters Family Health Service in East Harlem and the stories and lives that intersected with mine during those years. Sometimes I tell them about the first home visit I ever conducted. The Mexican family of four I was visiting lived in a tenement block and shared their apartment with 19 other people. Four families were crammed into this tiny, one-bedroom apartment. The allocated living space for the family I was visiting was the lower half of a



bunk bed. They had hung up a flowered sheet to give themselves a tiny modicum of privacy. Another family I visited had no crib for the baby they were expecting the next month; they showed me the dresser drawer they had lined with cloth for the baby to sleep in.

I tell the people who come to my literary events these stories of deprivation and poverty, of hardship and grief, but I also tell them about the enormous strength and determination I saw, the unshakeable sense of hope and optimism, and the powerful sense of community that was created by the Little Sisters for those who most needed connection and belonging.

As I helped families to navigate the complex new life they had stepped into in New York, I heard stories of the most profound trauma and of the most extraordinary resilience. I forged enduring friendships and I learned far more than I had could ever imagined. All of this experience found its way into *The Children's House*, which tells the story of an American woman, Marina, who forms a complex relationship with a Rwandan refugee woman she befriends one day on the streets of Harlem. She becomes intimately involved in the life of the Rwandan woman, Constance, and her small son Gabriel.

The complex and mutual relationships formed, the long afterlife of trauma, the difficulties of recreating home in a new land, the care of children by those whose psyches have been deeply damaged; I was immersed in all of this during those New York years and it was no surprise to me when I later found myself writing a novel that is haunted by these topics. The novel was published by Random House, and is currently being translated into other languages, and it has been a powerful means to allow me to carry on important conversations that stemmed from my time with the Little Sisters.



The Children's House is set in East Harlem, in the very brownstone where I lived. Some mornings I used to sit on the stoop with a cup of coffee and

watch the life of the street; the central character in my novel, Marina, does the same thing. In some ways, writing the novel was a way of dealing with my homesickness for New York, and also of exploring some of the ideas about connection, love, community

There's a line in a novel by the Canadian writer Anne Michaels that seems to be a wonderful summary of my preoccupations in *The Children's House*: 'There is nothing a man will not do to another. But there's also nothing a man will not do for another.' While my novel does explore some dark terrain, I also wanted to write about acts of grace and empathy; the profound echoes that compassion and generosity can have in individual lives and in communities. There are all sorts of kindnesses extended in the novel, often at great cost and sometimes with unexpected repercussions; this preoccupation is very much drawn from my time with the Little Sisters.

I believe that there's a kind of radical empathy in storytelling, an enlarging of our imaginative capacities, and I hope in particular that my novel's rendering of the Rwandan refugee woman, Constance, might help readers to consider the kind of experiences and terrors that have marked the life of a refugee, and how these might influence their way of being in the world. Sadly we live in an age where refugees and asylum-seekers are frequently demonized and I think that this comes from a dangerous failure of empathy and a lack of understanding. I do think that literature can create a special sort of space for examination and re-examination, for allowing the reader to consider different perspectives and perhaps come to new understandings about the world.

Throughout my time in New York and beyond, the Sisters I lived and worked with have been the most extraordinary examples of faith in action. The way that they lived their lives as embodiments of love, justice, empathy and community was enormously inspiring to me, and has changed the course of my life. The brownstone on 120th Street was always a place of refuge and welcome, and the Sisters themselves were so deeply beloved in the neighborhood. I remember so vividly my long talks with Sister Janet McCann about complex spiritual philosophy, my plotting with Sister Annette Allain about how we might convince a slum lord to treat his tenants better and my literary discussions with Sister Maureen O'Keefe, who was always so supportive of my creative work.



I will always be enormously grateful for the time I spent living and working with the Little Sisters in East Harlem. It transformed my life in more ways than I could have imagined and it is an enormous privilege to be carrying on the conversations that had their genesis in those East Harlem years in the wider world.

Alice Nelson

Brazil: A weakened hope, with a strengthened perseverance

"Her lot is with the poor, the working man and his family" (Father Pernet)

Even if hope is weakened, it challenges us to build together a more just and fraternal society, in order to make the Kingdom of God more visible and tangible for all humanity.

The world and specifically Brazil, is living through a string of crisis: economically, politically, morally, culturally, etc.

And our community, which is the only one to be inserted in the north-east of the country, is unceasingly willing to be a tool of God in the radical following of Jesus Christ Servant and Saviour, by extending our Charism and our Spirituality amongst the poor and working-class families.



Marcia, Silvaneide and Ana

Just Fraternity

We are three sisters in the community, and would certainly not be able to do anything by ourselves; our community apostolic project mainly focuses on welcoming and accompanying young people. Last year, we had a

gathering at the parish level, where we presented the different vocations to some young persons. In February 2019, there was a meeting for the vocation awakening in the diocese. These gatherings are prepared and facilitated by a commission of young laypeople -single persons or married couples – and Little Sisters of the Assumption.



Vocation gathering



We also work together with a group of laities from Caruarú and Campina Grande who deepen, explore and reflect on our Spirituality. Each group have their own organization, in their town and community, and a meeting of both groups is held on the feast of the Assumption.



Meeting of laities of the Assumption

We are inserted in a new missionary place, the housing project “Moura Brasil”, where poverty tends to cut families from their community. Many are affected by drugs – whether legal or not - unemployment, and many children grow up in the midst of suffering and misery.

Being aware of the reality of this place and willing to get closer to the families, we started meetings with children to offer them special moments allowing them to build their identity, through games, by weaving bonds of friendship between themselves and with their neighbours, through educational activities and spiritual times.



Demonstration against the breaking up of the Unique Social Aid System (SUAS)



Demonstration for the guarantee of rights

Perseverance is constantly renewed and strengthened by the many ministries and political or social movements in which we are taking part; we are present in the families through biblical circles, the prayer of rosary, home visits, celebrations and feasts, in the ministries with children, elderly people, deaf people, through our presence at the Religious Conference of Brazil (CRB), and in the spiritual and vocations accompaniment.



Children ministry

We also have our paid jobs : Sr Marcia is a coordinator at the Reference Centre for Social Aid, Maria is an auxiliary and Sr Ana Melo is a social worker in the project called “overcoming difficulties met by socially vulnerable people in their citizenship”, through a social and legal advice, at the popular education Center Assumption (CEPA)



Technical team of the CRAS



Deaf ministry

A work meeting at the legal and social aid - CEPA



We are “little” but our mission is immense. (E. Pernet)

Community of Caruarú

Presentation of the new International Laity Commission

The International Laity Commission Sr. Annette Allain, (USA, Co-coordinator), Roger Malenfant (Canada, Co-coordinator), Diana Neviere (France), Georges Lubamba Nzadikonda (DRC). Maryalice Spencer (USA), met at the Mother House in Paris, France June 24 – 28. It was the first time meeting together in person. We had been meeting monthly together for the last 9 months by Zoom Video Conference.

Sr. Agnes David (former coordinator) brought us up to date with the work of the last Commission. Sr. Pilar Trillo shared the work of the International Justice and Peace Commission and we are working on how these two commissions can work together.



*Roger Malenfant, Sr Annette Allain,
Maryalice Spencer, Diana Neviere, Georges Lubamba Nzadikonda*

Two of the AOLA, Suzette and Marinette spent an afternoon with us. They explained their lives and their call. We are also thinking about how we might work together in the future.

We met with the General Council to share the work we have prepared for the future.

We are really happy to begin this work as a commission and you can be sure you will be hearing from us as we continue to work

“Together, Little Sisters, AOLAs and Lay Companions are committed in diverse ways. Let us warmly welcome this spirit of mutuality as a gift of God so as to deepen our common journey. Let us commit ourselves even more in ways of solidarity, sharing, mission, work, projects, prayer, formation, organization ... Together, we will become active participants of the Reign of God.” (2017 General Chapter)

Each day our day began in the *caveau* at the tombs of our founders asking for their guidance as we, Little Sisters and Laity, move together into the future sharing our Common Treasure.



International Session for young professed sisters

“As members of an international Apostolic Congregation we discover the universality of the message which gathers together people of every continent. In the midst of their differences we recognize the common characteristics of these people to whom we are sent. Our solidarity extends beyond our local communities and our countries. It is a challenge to unity” (R.L. no.14)

In this same spirit by which we form an international body called to live unity we - the 25 young professed sisters from Vietnam, Madagascar, Burkina Faso, DRC, Spain - were pleased to gather together once again, after 2-3 years. Our 10 days were divided in 3 different parts:

- First, we had a time to get to know each other better and to welcome one another as young professed sisters and also as a Congregation.
- Then we had a time for reviewing our mission with three different moments: See, Judge and Act.
- Thirdly, we entered into the main theme of our session: “towards a full understanding of sexuality”



We are blessed and happy to be here for this enriching experience, for this opportunity to deepen our sense of religious life, as well as our LSA charism, so as to bring about hope in the life of each human being and to “win back a people for God” (E. Pernet)

At the end of each of these three moments, we are happy to see how the Spirit is at work in our lives and that, with the strength of the mission, we are becoming more and more Women-Religious-Apostles following Christ where He calls us to live.



On the last evening, we danced at the colours of our countries. The warm atmosphere reflected the fraternity we have been building during these days, as well as our rich and deep sharing which help us to go back with a renewed strength to the different horizons where we are called.

We send our regards to all of you, please accompany us and support us in your prayers.

With all our love,

Bernardine Munketalingi and Nguyen Thi Minh

SISTERS MAKING THEIR FINAL VOWS:

Yvette Landa on August 31st 2019 in Kinshasa (DR of Congo)

Lucia Uceda on September 14th in Sevilla (Spain)

Nguyen Thi Hoa on September 21st in Đông Hóa (Vietnam)

Odile Ratiana on November 30th in Fianarantsoa (Madagascar)

SISTERS MAKING THEIR FIRST COMMITMENT:

Maria Nguyen Thi Hao

Thérèse Nguyen Thi Nam

Maria Nguyen Thi Hong Nho

On September 8th 2019 in Beauvais (France)

www.assomption-psa.org

