

Modern Storytellers

Powerful tales, inspiring women... meet the most intriguing female voices of now

The scene stealer

SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON *has shifted her focus from fine art to feature films – and has now landed the biggest blockbuster of the moment. Nominated by SOFIA COPPOLA*

OSCAR-WINNING ICONIC DIRECTOR SOFIA COPPOLA SAYS: “I love Sam’s film installation *Third Party* – it felt like you were there, with some girl dancing in the corner. With her art background, I’m excited to see what she does as she continues in film. And it’s always inspiring to see a mother of several young children with a full-blown creative career.”

Female storytellers, from Jane Austen to Jane Campion, have been renowned for their ability to penetrate the nuances of emotion and reveal characters through what is left unsaid as well as what is said. The great ones also share an uncanny ability to throw a light on the peccadilloes of the day. Visual artist and filmmaker, Sam Taylor-Johnson, is on her way to joining that grand company with her latest film, the much-anticipated *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Starring Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan, EL James’ trilogy is the publishing phenomenon of our time. The film – which is being kept under titanium-strength wraps until its release next spring – is set to be a monster hit.

“The book has a monumental fan base, which is terrifying,” says Taylor-Johnson, having just wrapped the film in Vancouver. The British director was chosen over contenders reputed to include Angelina Jolie and Steven Soderbergh. Announcing the choice, coproducer Michael De Luca praised Taylor-Johnson for her ability to “gracefully showcase complex relationships”.

Her storytelling potential was first spotted by late director Anthony Minghella, who invited her to make a short film, *Love You More*, in 2008. He told her to “never rest on your laurels; always keep striving forward”, advice the 47-year-old has heeded. She’s survived two bouts of cancer and a divorce (from art dealer Jay Jopling). She’s now married to actor, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, and is a devoted mother to four daughters.

Her passion for storytelling began in childhood, finding its expression later at art school. “Cinema is about the experience of going into a big, dark room

and being told a story – I’ve always enjoyed that. At art school I couldn’t work out how I fitted in, where my voice was. I had a fantastic teacher who showed me all the Warhol films and seeing how experimental film could be, I felt that was the realm I wanted to go into.”

Taylor-Johnson has a magician-like ability to turn stories on their head and reveal what’s unsaid through sumptuous visual compositions. She often removes obvious elements of a scenario and ‘sculpts’ around the holes, hinting at what’s been removed. Her portrait of David Beckham features one of the world’s most active men, asleep, while *Crying Men* (2004) shows male Hollywood actors (including Robert Downey Jr., Paul Newman and Sean Penn) in tears.

“I don’t work any differently on a huge studio picture or in my studio. I think creatively and attack what is front of me,” says Taylor-Johnson. “When I was looking for my first movie, I’d never have said I wanted to make a music biopic of John Lennon [*Nowhere Boy*, 2009] or thought *Fifty* was the right movie for me,” she admits. “It is whether something speaks to you and whether you feel you have a unique view to impart. Storytelling is about finding a different way of looking.”

With the film’s production now complete – a demanding schedule that saw its director take up transcendental meditation in order to cope with its rigors – Taylor-Johnson is looking forward to kicking back with her family and reading *Marvel* comics to her daughters. “Right now I want a big step back, and a big breath of fresh air,” she laughs. *By Harriet Quick*
Fifty Shades of Grey will be released February 2015

Photographer
Mary McCartney
Stylist
Daniella Wells-Cole

Men’s shirt by
Louis Vuitton,
£595; jeans by
J Brand, £250;
pumps by Saint
Laurent by Hedi
Slimane, £370

Hair: Danna Turnerford. Makeup: Victoria Down. Digital assistant: Alex Foreman. Production: Samantha Beckett

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SOFIA COPPOLA

”



“
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of those who are often
forgotten, ignored or
misunderstood
”

ALICIA KEYS

Photographer
Henry Bourne
Stylist
Helen Broadfoot

Dress by Gucci,
£2,180; shoes by
Jason Wu, £985;
ring by Etro, £100;
bangles by Ashley
Pittman £465;
cuff by Arme De'L
Amour, £280

Hair and makeup Daniele Mui Production Chiara Callegari

The sensation

A gifted novelist with international breadth, TAIYE SELASI makes being a literary supernova look easy. Nominated by ALICIA KEYS

SINGER AND MULTIPLE GRAMMY WINNER, ALICIA KEYS SAYS: “Taiye is a great storyteller due to her generous heart, whipsmart intelligence and extraordinary creativity. She uses that to highlight the lives of those who are often forgotten, ignored or misunderstood around our fragmented and often divided world. What a magnificent voice”

You couldn't make up a less provincial person than Taiye Selasi. The 35-year-old novelist, essayist, screenwriter, photographer and broadcaster is insanely global. Born in London, raised in Brookline, Massachusetts, and educated at Yale and Oxford, her first novel, *Ghana Must Go*, was published to great acclaim last year and she was duly named one of Granta's 20 Best of Young British Novelists. Hugely gifted, she seems to have access to all kinds of hidden, worldly knowledge, stories and secrets. Perhaps it helps that she's a twin, and her mother is a Nigerian pediatrician, her father a Ghanaian surgeon and poet. Selasi herself, her website states, lives in Rome, New Delhi and New York. Did someone mention global?

How does that work, I ask. Do you feel British or American or African? And where do you actually live? “The short answer is Rome. This is where my flat is, my desktop, my neighborhood bar. The rest of the cities I visit at least once a year, for the same reason: love. My twin sister's in New York, our mother in Accra, my so-called ‘fairy godchildren’ just outside of Delhi. I travel to see the people I love; I come home to Italy.” As to how she feels in terms of her nationality: “There is no real place for ‘or’ in my sense of self,” she explains. “I am Ghanaian and Nigerian and British and American. My identity is rooted in things much, much smaller than nation, and things much, much bigger.”

Ghana Must Go could only have been written by someone who seems able to straddle the world. It tells the story of a Nigerian-Ghanaian family in Massachusetts, whose patriarch is a world-class surgeon – until, for various painful reasons, he abandons his professional life, as well as his wife and children. The family, splintered apart by the betrayal, becomes fractured in all kinds of ways. Sections of the novel are set in Lagos, London and New York, as well as Brookline, and each one rings entirely true. But though many details in the novel chime with Selasi's own biography, the book stands squarely as a work of fiction, the result of vision rather than a veiled memoir.

Selasi, after all, had already made a name for herself in non-fiction, writing an essay in 2005 called *Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an*

Afropolitan?), and yes, if you're familiar with the term Afropolitan (meaning, loosely, highly educated, cosmopolitan young Africans), it was she who coined it. She'd also written a play (that was produced), and published a short story, *The Sex Life of African Girls* (in Granta, no less, in 2011), but though she says she has known since she was four that she was a writer, she was 30 before she took the plunge and quit her job in TV to write full-time. It took her six months to even begin *Ghana Must Go*.

“I'd gone to a yoga retreat in Sweden,” she says. “This was six months into the year-long Taiye Selasi Writing Fellowship. After quitting my job in TV, I had just enough saved to support myself for a year. In short, I was terrified. It took about six months to clear the land: to settle the mind, to open the heart, and I'd written nothing. Then one morning, in the shower, the entire novel sort of appeared to me: the characters, plot, structure, even the last line. I scribbled out the whole idea on a piece of scrap paper, then typed it on my laptop. I found the document the other day. It's a page long. The novel is exactly as I saw it, the last line exactly the same.”

She makes it sound both easy and impossibly dreamlike, but for all the grace of her muse, Selasi is nothing if not a grafter. Her projects seem endless and myriad. She takes photographs, makes documentaries, is filming a literary, X-factor-type TV show in Rome, and writing a screenplay for singer-turned-movie producer Alicia Keys. She is also signed up to write a second novel. “I have about three lined up,” she says, “and am trying to decide which comes next. I'm leaning toward the love story. In *Ghana Must Go*, there wasn't enough sex. The family deserved more sex.”

And, of course, as well as all the work, Selasi is always on the move. She has visited over 50 cities (on a book tour for *Ghana Must Go*) since last March alone, needing only “relative silence and resplendent light” to write. “Photography, fiction, screenplays, documentaries: they're just different ways of finding beauty and telling stories,” she says. “I don't know any other way to be in the world, but to observe and record its beauty.” *By Daisy Garnett*

Ghana Must Go (Penguin) is out now

The auteur

Chinese-born XIAOLU GUO, a writer of penetrating tales about the human condition, is an intellectual heavyweight to be reckoned with. Nominated by LISACORTES

PRODUCER OF THE OSCAR-WINNING MOVIE PRECIOUS, LISA CORTES SAYS: "Xiaolu cuts through the noise and speaks to the power of claiming authentic voices. In her work, she is reducing the fat, reconfiguring stereotypes and pushing us through to new vistas. She challenges us to sit on hard stools with our complexities and contradictions. She brings realness, passion and pain to dine with us."

For Xiaolu Guo, telling stories is not a way of making a living, it is life itself. "Apart from writing, eating and sleeping, there is no other life," she says simply. Just turned 40, she has spent all of her adult years creating other worlds, a vocation that has taken her from a peasant village off the south coast of China where she grew up reading *Mao's Little Red Book*, to Hackney, where she now lives, an elegant, intelligent face of London's international literary scene.

Guo was just 18 when she left home for film school in Beijing. She started writing novels soon after, producing five before she turned 30. When she arrived in London, she could barely speak English. "Just baby talk, really. Sometimes I'd struggle to get 10 words out." An industrious soul, she turned the struggle into her first English-language novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers*. The story of a relationship between a Chinese immigrant girl and an older Englishman, it took the form of a glossary in broken English. Each entry detailed the heroine's grapples with concepts like the pub ("a place of middle-aged-man's culture") and the Full English ("Delicacy is baked beans. Only problem is tastes like somebody put beans into mouth but spit out and back into plate").

The novel marked Guo out as a uniquely boundary-teasing and witty voice, and was shortlisted for the 2007 Orange Prize. She followed it up with *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, a Generation-X tale about a Beijing girl and *Lovers in the Age of Indifference*, a set of globe-trotting short stories about modern love, including one told entirely in text messages.

I Am China, which is published in June, is another remarkable achievement. A tale of romance and revolution, it centers on two young Chinese dissidents – Mu, a poet, and her lover Jian, a punk. Their story is told through letters, diary entries, poems and songs as translated by a third lead character, the obsessive and sexually-charged Iona. "I've written eight novels so far and all of them have been preparation for this," says Guo, shy and proud at once. "I had this painful yearning to write a complex narrative with multiple

characters, across multiple cultures. It's quite a leap for me." It is a truly global novel, criss-crossing from Tiananmen Square to a Dover detention center via LA, Crete, Paris, Berlin and London. The narrative voyage mirrors Guo's own. For the past decade since she left China, she has lived a "bohemian" life, dotting between Berlin, Hamburg, Paris and London, settling wherever someone will pay her to write for a while.

"I never really feel like I belong to anywhere," she says. "I have always felt quite lonely, that I don't belong." The last few years have seen personal shifts, too. Both of her parents – a fisherman and a factory worker – died from cancer. Then, a year ago, she had her first child, a daughter called Moon Nanook, with her Australian partner, Stephen, a philosopher.

There is something about Guo that seems to hail from another time, like her idols – Marguerite Duras, Italo Calvino, the Beat poets (*I Am China* takes its title from Allen Ginsberg's *America*). "I feel consumer society has swallowed the romantic and revolutionary spirit of the artist now," she says. "I am anti professional novel-writing. I express when there is something urgent to express." Most urgently now, she wants to engage with politics. "If I can find a format to talk about the battle between East and West, the misunderstandings, the translation difficulties, I'll be really very happy."

Certainly, she is not afraid to speak out. At the Jaipur Literature Festival in January she rounded mischievously on Jonathan Franzen, telling him that his brand of American realism was "massively overrated". "If you read a story in *The New Yorker*, it's always natural realism. It's so plain, so boring, a manicured narrative, like fictional journalism," she says. "I don't want to blame America, it's really about our industry. We make the same product because it sells, rather than being brave and promoting great work from Vietnam, China or the Arab world. It's killing our imagination and literature." That may be true, but in a small flat in a Hackney tower block, Guo is keeping both gloriously and colorfully alive. *By Alice Jones*

I Am China (Chatto & Windus) is published in June

In Xiaolu's work, she is reducing the fat, reconfiguring stereotypes and pushing us through to new vistas

LISA CORTES

Photographer
Henry Bourne
Stylist
Laura Timson

Shirt by Donna
Karan, £625; skirt
by Valentino, £1,355;
sandals by Givenchy,
£455; belt by McQ,
£100; necklace by
Erdem, £630

Hair and makeup: Naitsumi Naitia

The mothers' champion

Ethiopian supermodel LIYA KEBEDE is communicating urgent life and death stories about maternal health that we all need to hear. Nominated by SARAH BROWN

PRESIDENT OF THEIRWORLD AND WIFE OF FORMER BRITISH PRIME MINISTER, GORDON, SARAH BROWN SAYS: "Liya is a persistent champion for women and children's health. She generously shares her own story of growing up in Ethiopia and highlights the right to good maternal care for women everywhere. She was at the forefront of the maternal mortality campaign that has seen hundreds of thousands of young mothers' lives saved."

Achieving supermodel status comes with a certain level of international exposure that can be translated into high-profile side gigs aplenty, making the runway queen-turned-reality star or beauty mogul a story often told these days. But Liya Kebede has chosen a different path. "I had the chance to live the life that I have now, and I have an amazing platform to give back in a bigger way than I ever thought possible. So that is kind of how I got involved," Kebede explains of her long-standing commitment to maternal and child healthcare advocacy.

Sixteen years after a 20-year-old Kebede moved to Chicago by way of Paris to try her hand at modeling in 1998, the Addis Ababa-born beauty is as in demand now as she was when the designer Tom Ford handpicked her as his SS2000 Gucci exclusive. At 34, the first-ever woman of color to join Estée Lauder's prestigious spokesmodel corps graced the runway at both Proenza Schouler and Emilio Pucci. "From time to time I still enjoy walking," she admits – when she has any to spare, that is. As well as being mom to her 13-year-old son Suhul and 8-year-old daughter Raee, whom she raises with the Ethiopian hedge fund manager, Kassy Kebede, the New York-based model also runs Lemlem, a clothing line made in Ethiopia by local craftswomen working towards economic independence. Since its launch in 2009, the woven kaftans, scarves, shirts and shorts have garnered a serious celebrity following that includes Julia Roberts, Mary-Louise Parker and Gwyneth Paltrow.

Most of all, though, there's Kebede's commitment to her Liya Kebede Foundation (LKF), which is devoted to improving global access to health services needed before, during and after childbirth. "It chose me in a way," she explains, which began with her appointment as a World

Health Organization Goodwill Ambassador for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health in 2005, and grew through the creation of her foundation in 2006. "When WHO told me that every minute a woman dies of pregnancy complications in Third World countries and sub-Saharan Africa, that really spoke to me. These women are not dying from things that don't have a cure; they're dying because they don't have access to basic medical care."

Kebede is trying to give them that access through LKF which, in addition to raising awareness, serves as a vehicle to help fund initiatives, like her current collaboration with the Ethiopian government and the Ethiopian North American Health Professionals Association. "We were able to secure equipment, and at the same time pay for the training of many of the staff there," she explains of her organization's involvement with the groundbreaking Maternal & Child Health Center in Hawassa, a public-private clinic four hours south of Addis Ababa, which offers reproductive, pre and postnatal, and emergency obstetric care to half a million women.

"We're looking to expand a similar program with other partners," Kebede says enthusiastically, an effort for which she was recognized with a Glamour Woman of the Year Award in 2013, an honor she shared with friend and fellow maternal health advocate, Christy Turlington-Burns. "The true measure of their success will be their work ending the unacceptable global tragedy of maternal mortality," an appreciative Iman declared as she presented them the award at the annual event. "Investing in mothers is so important," Kebede reiterates. "This little effort is changing the lives of these women. It's wonderful to see." *By Celia Ellenberg theliyakebedefoundation.org*



Photographer
Miguel Reveriego
Stylist
Jada Fitzgerald

Jumpsuit by Lemlem,
POA; shoes by Chloé,
£420; necklace by
Pamela Love, £380;
bracelet by Isabel
Marant, £125; cuff by
Andra Neen, £330

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SARAH BROWN