

## ‘UNCERTAIN LIGHT’, A NOVEL THAT EXPLORES THE ‘FLOATING WORLD’ OF DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

INTERVIEW WITH MARION MOLTENO

AUTHOR OF ‘UNCERTAIN LIGHT’

*English-language fiction about Central Asia remains rare. This month author Marion Molteno published her latest novel *Uncertain Light*, which is set in the last months of the civil war in Tajikistan. Inspired by real events, the novel tells the story of the abduction of an international aid worker and how the crisis affects his colleagues. Marion took the time to speak to Eurasian Dialogue about her book.*

### **Eurasian Dialogue: Tell us about *Uncertain Light***

Marion Molteno: It’s a story in which someone is abducted in Tajikistan, and the effect that has on the people close to him. It is set in late 1996 – 1997, when the civil war was dragging to an end but things were still insecure. A group of Tajiks and UN military observers are in the mountains beyond Gharm monitoring the cease fire, and are taken hostage. One of them is a UN peace negotiator, Rahul Khan; when eventually most of the hostages are released, he and one other are kept back and disappear in mysterious circumstances.

The story follows those closest to Rahul, scattered across the world, as they try to come to terms with what happened to him. Tessa is Irish, in her thirties, now married with two children, but Rahul was her first love and she has never stopped loving him. Her devastation at his disappearance sparks a crisis in her marriage. Hugo is Swiss, as Rahul’s UN mentor and supervisor he feels responsible for the abduction and is driven to try to uncover the truth of



Marion Molteno

credit: author

what happened. Rahul's long-standing friend, Lance is a Canadian aid worker; he realises now that he had used Rahul's reliable companionship to avoid facing up to the gaps in his own life. When the organisation he works for sends him to Kyrgyzstan, near the border with Tajikistan, he gets to know a Tajik woman Nargis, who owes Rahul a personal debt but has secrets she cannot share. Each of these four – at first unknown to each other – have had to find a way to start again, and gradually as their paths cross they piece together the full story of what Rahul was doing in Central Asia.

**“EACH OF THE  
FOUR HAVE HAD  
TO FIND A WAY  
TO START AGAIN”**

It's a story of personal relationships, but because they're all people who are engaged with the society they're living in, the places and the political context are essential parts of the story. We move with them in each of the countries they are based in; but the critical parts are set in Central Asia in the immediate post-Soviet period, and I did as much research as I could to convey accurately what it was like to be there at the time.

**“THE CRITICAL PARTS ARE SET IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE IMMEDIATE  
POST-SOVIET PERIOD, AND I DID AS MUCH RESEARCH AS I COULD TO  
CONVEY ACCURATELY WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE THERE AT THE TIME”**

### **When did you first visit Tajikistan?**

In 1997, about the time the peace accords were being signed after four years of civil war. I was working for Save the Children in a senior policy position, based in London but with short stints in many countries in Africa and Asia. In each I was working alongside people of that country who were trying to find sustainable ways to support some of the most vulnerable children. The point of my role was to bring useful experience from one country to the attention of people working in others, so we didn't keep reinventing the wheel or fall into the same traps.

It was in that capacity that I was invited to work with colleagues in Tajikistan, and the experience was mind-opening. Like many people in the West, I had grown up knowing very little about it; it was simply that large red part of the map called the Soviet Union and we knew nothing about its constituent parts. Being there was stimulating, moving, delightful and humbling, all at the same time. It was everywhere obvious what huge transformations people

**“IT WAS EVERYWHERE  
OBVIOUS WHAT HUGE  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
PEOPLE WERE FACING”**

were facing – changes since the end of the Soviet system, the terrible legacy of the civil war, the economic collapse. I was working in the area around Qurqon Teppe, which was one of the worst affected in the civil war. Save the Children's programme was staffed almost entirely by women who had lost

husbands in the war – women from both sides of the conflict, now working together to prevent other widows and their children becoming destitute. They were exceptional people – warm, compassionate, competent, and they defied stereotypes. They had been educated by the Soviet system, but they wore traditional highly coloured Tajik dress. And they loved poetry. I had not realised until then that Tajik is in fact Persian, that some of the greatest Persian poets came from here. Here were stories, asking to be told.

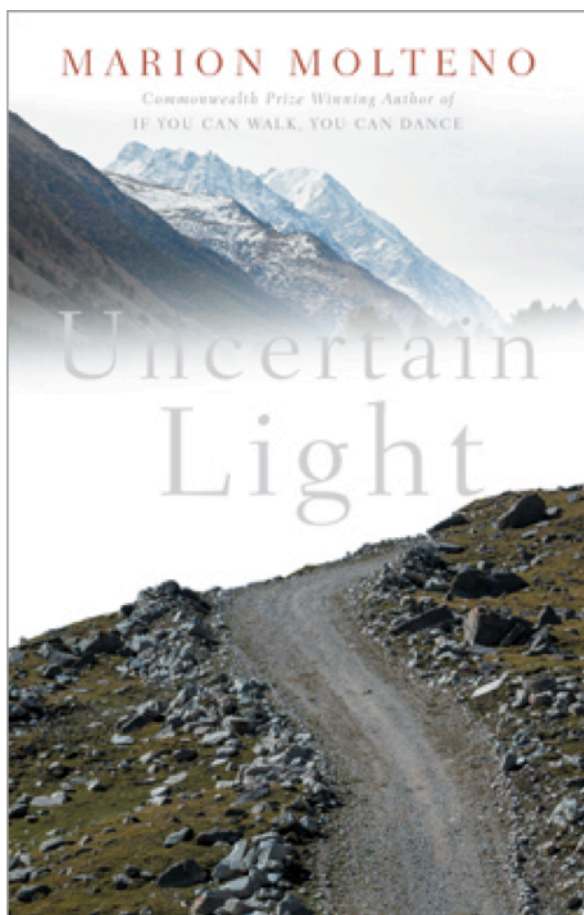
### **What inspired you to set the story among development workers?**

It was the perspective through which I had been introduced to Central Asia, so it was the one I could most authentically use. But also I wanted to give a sense of what the world of development workers is like; most people who will read this novel will have little concept of it. It's a floating community of people from many different countries and backgrounds – what they share is an engagement with the people, the issues, the places where they work. Development Aid often gets a poor press, but the reality for people who work in it is as complex as in any other area of life. The central characters in the novel are at different points on a spectrum - Rahul, the one who is abducted is Indian, started out as a political journalist and social activist in India, then joined an international organization, then the UN's refugee agency, ending up in a warzone. His friend Lance is Canadian, a late 1960s drop-out who wanted to do something useful with his life and found his way into working for a small development agency, moving from country to country every few years. It's a lifestyle that creates its own difficulties - he has never managed to make a partnership that lasted. Hugo, Rahul's UN supervisor, has spent his life responding to humanitarian crises – earthquakes, wars, floods – and the resultant crises for people who are forced to flee. He takes his job very seriously – and it costs him his family life.

**“THE WORLD OF  
DEVELOPMENT  
WORKERS IS A  
FLOATING COMMUNITY  
OF PEOPLE FROM MANY  
DIFFERENT COUNTRIES  
AND BACKGROUNDS”**

**“EACH OF THEM  
HAS THEIR OWN  
STORY OF HOW  
THEY GOT TO BE  
WHERE THEY  
ARE NOW”**

Like many people in these roles, he and Lance are principled, conscientious, critical of the structures they have to work through, and suffer from self-doubt about what they are doing and whether it is useful. Tessa is an 'international' in another way - when she was a child her family moved from country to country in South East Asia, following her father's work as a road building engineer. Nargis has never lived elsewhere than in Kyrgyzstan but she has been uprooted in another way by the economic collapse: she was a university-based scientist until her job disappeared. As the sole earner for her family, she had no choice but to take whatever work she could, and became an interpreter for UNICEF. So each of them has their own story of how they got to be where they are now, and how they became involved with Rahul. And we see events through each of their different perspectives.



Cover of 'Uncertain Light' credit: Andrew Corbett

### Is the novel based on historical events?

Definitely. The whole political context is real. The starting point – the hostage-taking in the mountains beyond Gharm – actually happened. The media reported that 23 people were taken hostage, but in all subsequent reports I could only find references to 21 of them being released. My fictional story grew out of the mystery of what happened to the other two. There repeated hostage-taking episodes by the same group, until their leader, Rizwan Sadirov, and most of his group were killed in an armed encounter with government forces in December 1997. And well beyond Central Asia there were many incidents of aid workers being kidnapped and sometimes killed; with the usual terrible dilemmas over whether to give in to demands, knowing that everyone becomes more insecure if you do.

For me the date is also important – it's pre 9/11, before the western powers got involved in

Afghanistan. Islamic fundamentalism was on the rise but that isn't what the civil war was about, or the hostage-taking. There were – and still are – other forces making such things happen: the collapse of the economy, of security – the demands were often political or financial, but antagonism towards international agencies came into it. It's dangerous being an aid worker in a war-zone, it takes a special kind of courage. Just a few months ago five Save the Children workers were abducted in Afghanistan, and when the kidnappers' demands weren't met, all five were killed. They were Afghans; they'd been helping people in remote villages get access to clean water.

**“ANTAGONISM  
TOWARDS  
INTERNATIONAL  
AGENCIES CAME  
INTO IT”**

**What about the poetry in the novel? In the first section, the protagonist Tessa repeatedly hears the lines "the wind blows hard, the night is dark, the stormy waves are rising" when Rahul is kidnapped. What is the significance of this poem?**

You won't have discovered it yet in the bit you've read, but there's a strand of Urdu/Persian poetry that runs like a leitmotif through the novel. That verse is the first indication of it. Long before I went to Tajikistan I had studied Urdu poetry, which derives from Farsi poetry; and I

**“I KNEW THAT IN SOCIETIES INFLUENCED BY PERSIAN CULTURAL HISTORY, POETRY HAS A SPECIAL PLACE”**

knew that in societies influenced by Persian cultural history, poetry has a special place. Among Tajiks, despite 70 years of Soviet rule and the banning of the Persian script, that tradition lives on. One of my Tajik friends told me that in their family when a child was born they placed the divan [collected poems] of Hafiz on its forehead, even though the poems were written in the Persian script, which they couldn't read. They did it so that the child would absorb the spirit of the sufi poetry to which he or she was heir.

In the story Rahul is an Urdu speaker who has grown up with Urdu poetry around him, who then learns Farsi out of an interest in the poetry. When he subsequently goes to work in northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan, he is moving through areas where Farsi/Persian is spoken (though it is called Dari in Afghanistan and Tajik in Tajikistan). There's also a story around a Tajik poet and what happened during the Soviet period, which I won't go into as I'd like not to spoil it before you read it!

**“RAHUL IS AN URDU SPEAKER WHO LEARNS FARSI OUT OF AN INTEREST IN THE POETRY”**

**Do you plan to translate the novel into Tajik?**

I'd love to have the book translated! But neither the UK nor the Indian publisher would have the resources to pay for that, so it could only happen as an act of love on someone's part. If anyone competent did offer, perhaps we could find a grant to finance it. But there's also the question of how to make the novel as it stands available in Tajikistan to people who do read English, or known among people with an interest in the region. The publishers don't have distribution mechanisms in Central Asia. I'd love it to reach such people, whether Central Asians or people from outside who have lived and worked there, and hear from them what they think of it.

Marion Molteno is an author and international development professional. She won the 1999 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best book in the Africa region for *If You Can Walk, You Can Dance*. From 1993 to 2007 she was a policy advisor to the international development charity Save the Children, where she supported staff who work with disadvantaged children in over 50 countries.