



AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE LANDSMAN

South African Worcester-born novelist and SA PEN member, Anne Landsman, won the 2009 *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize and the 2009 M-Net Literary Award for English fiction for her second novel, *The Rowing Lesson*. It was also shortlisted for the \$100 000 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature, and for the 2008 Harold U. Ribalow Prize. *The Rowing Lesson* was included in the Top 29 Fiction Books of 2008 chosen by Angel Gurria-Quintana for the *Financial Times* and was selected as one of the Top 10 South African Books of 2008, as chosen by *The Times* book editor, Tymon Smith. Anne's first novel, *The Devil's Chimney*, was nominated for four awards, including the M-Net Prize.

SA PEN: *The Rowing Lesson* has garnered many awards this year. How did it feel to hear that you'd won the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize?

ANNE LANDSMAN: I was very excited, very overwhelmed. Since I've lived outside of the country for so long, it felt like a homecoming of sorts, an acknowledgment of the central role South Africa has played in my life.

SAP: Have you started work on your next book yet and are you intimidated at all by *The Rowing Lesson's* success?

AL: I began my new book a while ago, in fits and starts. The writing is slowly starting to gather momentum, I'm happy to report. It's never easy for me to end one project and begin another, and this particular transition was no exception. Also, each book has its own landscape, its own voice, which has to be invented from scratch so the earlier work is not much help in this regard. And when the earlier work is received well, as *The Rowing Lesson* has been, it casts a long shadow. But every day, as I write the new story, I feel myself moving further and further out from under the shadow.

SAP: Your first two books were set in South Africa. You reside in New York. Any plans to set a future book in the Big Apple?

AL: I wish the answer to this question was a resounding "Yes!" but so far it hasn't worked out that way. Whenever I try to write fiction that's set in New York, or in the U.S. for that matter, it feels very thin to me. I still feel tied to South Africa even though I live somewhere else.

SAP: Where do you write? (room/house/place?)

AL: I work in the Writers Room, a not-for-profit workspace for writers in Lower Manhattan. It's an office space filled with desks, much like a newsroom, but completely silent. The membership fee is nominal, and the members are entitled to use whatever desk is available. Off the main floor, on the other side of a soundproof door, is a small kitchen, and there's also a storage room for research materials and computers. I leave my computer in a locker there and take my work home on a flash drive so that I can print out whatever it is I've been working on.

SAP: As a mother of young children, do you write on a regular basis, if so, what time of the day?

AL: Each day brings its own challenges, surprises. Sometimes, I have a long block of time, when the children are in school, other days I have to take them to the doctor, or talk them through something on the phone. My daughter is fourteen and my son is almost twelve so they're increasingly independent. I try to get to the

Writers Room every day, for most of the day, but this doesn't always happen.

SAP: What music do you play in the background, if any, while writing?

AL: I need total silence to be able to concentrate properly. As I write, I'm always listening to the sound the words make in my head so having music on at the same time would drive me crazy!

SAP: What foodstuffs do you snack on and drink while writing?

AL: The director of the Writers Room, Donna Brodie, knows writers well and always makes sure that there is a big jar full of M & M's (American Smarties) and another jar filled with pretzel sticks in the kitchen. No food is allowed on the main floor so I tend to dart into the kitchen every so often for a snack break. Around four in the afternoon, I make myself a cup of (decaf) tea.

SAP: You left South Africa in your twenties. Are you drawn to books written by fellow Africans, set in Africa?

AL: I've always been a big fan of African writing, from all parts of the continent. There is such an inexhaustible wealth of ideas, cultures, histories and stories from Africa.

SAP: *The Rowing Lesson* has been described as an elegy to your father and seems semi-autobiographical. Was it hard or easy to write seeing as you were drawing on your own experiences?

AL: Most writing - either directly or indirectly - is drawn from the writer's experiences. What made *The Rowing Lesson* hard to write was the intensity of the voice. Betsy tells her father's story on the last day of his life, and to make her voice authentic I had to remember what it was like when my own father was dying.

SAP: Your first novel, *The Devil's Chimney*, was set in Oudstroom. Have you ever climbed 'The Devil's Chimney' in the Cango Caves and if so, what did you think of the experience?

AL: As a child, I visited the Cango Caves many times with my family. However, I never actually got a chance to climb the Devil's Chimney. At first, it was because I was too young, and then they closed those areas of the caves because of the poor air quality. My siblings, who are several years older than me, spoke with great excitement about climbing through the Devil's Chimney and I was always terribly jealous that they had had the experience and I hadn't.



Anne Landsman

SAP: You studied at film school and considered becoming a director or a screenwriter. Would you like to see *The Devil's Chimney* or *The Rowing Lesson* filmed? Would you write the screenplay? Any preferred choice of director and lead actors?

AL: Interestingly enough, a big chunk of the plot of *The Devil's Chimney* started out as my thesis screenplay at Columbia University's Film Division. Years later, I reimagined the story as a novel, told through the eyes of Connie Lambrecht, the narrator. After the novel was published, it was optioned by a South African production company and an American independent producer, and I was commissioned to write the screenplay. So the material exists in three forms – the original screenplay, the novel, the screenplay adaptation – and they are all quite different. I'd love to see Charlize Theron play both Connie and Miss Beatrice, the two female leads in the story. I haven't really thought about *The Rowing Lesson* as a movie yet.

SAP: What is your favourite book-turned-into-a-movie? Was the movie as good as the book?

AL: One of my favourite adaptations is the movie, *Adaptation*, loosely based on the book, *The Orchid Thief*, because it is, in part, about the difficulty of adapting a book for the screen. The screenwriter's predicament becomes part of the story.

SAP: Do you make written notes about characters, plot, etc., on various pieces of paper such as shopping lists as you go about your day, or do you file the notes away in your memory and recall them when your fingers next touch the keyboard?

AL: When I'm immersed in a story, I'm always teasing out the characters' lives and actions in my head, so yes, I do take notes everywhere – on scrap pieces of paper, old envelopes, in my journal. More recently, I've begun to make digital notes on my phone as well.

SAP: Do you meet people or visit places and immediately think "I must use that person, character trait, place, scene"?

AL: Yes, yes, yes.

SAP: Did you grow up in a house filled with books? What books did you read as a child and are you reading those same books to your own children?

AL: My mother was a voracious reader and my father loved printed matter of all kinds so the house was filled with books, journals, magazines and newspapers. I started out as a big Dr. Seuss fan, and still am. One of the great joys of my life has been sharing my love of reading with my children. I've read all the books I loved as a child to them – *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*, *Sam I am*, *Scuffy the Tugboat*, *Petunia's Christmas*, *Sam and the Firefly*, *Go Dog Go*, and later on *Black Beauty*, the *William* books. The list just goes on and on...

SAP: Do you remember reading your first "grown up" book? At what age and what was it?

AL: I was eight when I read Leon Uris's *Exodus*. Soon after, my mom started taking me to the grown-up section of the Worcester Public Library instead of the children's section.

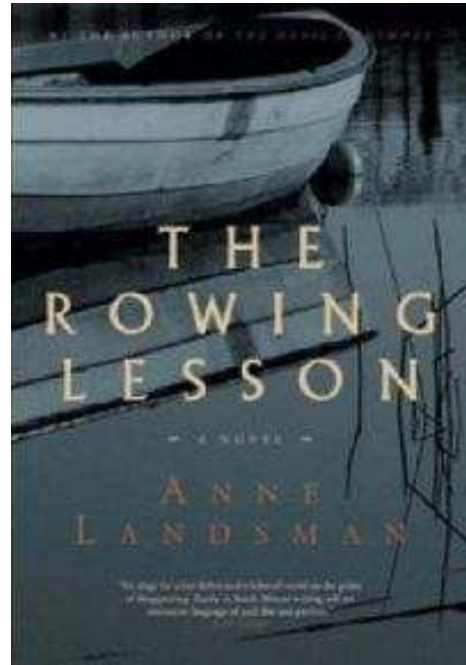
SAP: What book/s are you currently reading?

AL: I'm reading Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, which should be required reading for everyone. Next on my list is the novel, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, by Muriel Barbery.

SAP: What is your most treasured book and why?

AL: Three out of my four grandparents had already passed away by the time I was born so the only grandparent I knew was my father's mother. She died when I was quite young so my memories of her are fairly hazy. I do remember that she wore hairnets with little sparkling stones in them, and had an infectious laugh. For one of my birthdays she gave me an anthology of stories about princesses, aptly titled,

Princesses. There was one story about a long-nosed princess that I just adored, and read over and over again. When I immigrated to the States, my mother sent *Princesses* to me and the book sits proudly on the shelf in my study, with an inscription inside from my grandmother which reads, "To my darling Anne, With love from Gran." It's my only direct link with the generation that preceded my parents.



WELCOME TO OUR NEW SA PEN MEMBERS:

Karina Brink
Merle Huntley
Jerilyn Miripol
Goldlyn Ozowuba
Jonathan Shapiro

REQUEST FOR NEWS

Had a book / short story / poem / article published recently? Achieved a personal milestone of note? The compiler would welcome any news of your activities for future issues of SA PEN News. I would also welcome any contributions to the newsletter! Suggestions and comments would not go amiss either. My contact details are: e-mail: rudebs@icon.co.za, tel: (021) 701-8510, postal: PO Box 732, Constantia, 7848. I look forward to hearing from you. Deborah Horn-Botha, Secretary, SA PEN.

15 YEARS INTO DEMOCRACY AND CENSORSHIP IS STEADILY CREEPING UP ON US

By Raymond Louw

Despite all the claims by government spokesmen from the president down that South Africa is a functioning democracy that adheres to constitutional values of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, censorship is insidiously creeping up on us through a barrage of laws and other conduct. Protests by lawyers and the media at restrictions in news laws are largely ignored. Those responsible claim they have consulted widely or will provide the opportunity to do so, but it amounts to lip service. Time is provided by parliamentary portfolio committees to hear representations against the legislation put forward, but many of those who take part in that process feel it has been a charade and that they may as well have put their views to a brick wall. The censorship process goes back a long way but it has accelerated in the last few years, especially this year. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act was passed in the year 2000 with the intention of preventing and prohibiting hate speech, but it immediately raised freedom of expression concerns.

Section 10 of the Act lays down that no person may publish, propagate, advocate or communicate words based on one or more of the prohibited grounds - race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth or undermines human dignity - against any person, that could reasonably be construed to demonstrate a clear intention to be hurtful; harmful or to incite harm; or promote or propagate hatred. This raised concerns among journalists about the reporting of statements which offend against this section because the protection accorded the media based on fair and accurate reporting in the public interest is extremely narrow.

Lawyers at the University of the Witwatersrand Law School describe the legislation as likely to have a "powerful chilling effect" on the media, forcing editors to engage in self-censorship and censoring advertisers.

Early this year the Films and Publications Act was signed into law. Journalists complained this legislation introduces pre-publication censorship for a wide range of publications. A clause protects bona fide newspapers subject to the Press Ombudsman's code of conduct but some 700 publications and magazines, including imported publications, are not protected and have to comply with the Act's censorship.

All publications are hit by clauses which deal with information supplied to journalists about people indulging in pornography. This information normally comes to a journalist because the informant does not want to complain directly to the police and hopes that the journalist will publish the story. Normally journalists would establish the accuracy of the information and publish.

But now journalists are forced by this Act to report such information and the identity of the source to the police. If the journalist does not do so, he or she faces the prospect of a prison sentence. This law will cause such tip-offs to dry up. What's worse is that a crime is committed even if there is only a suspicion about the pornographic activity.

The next item is the Key Points Act which prevents publication about security arrangements at certain strategic installations and buildings or other institutions deemed to be national key points. This prohibits descriptions of the reaction of security guards to a demonstration or an attack on a key point.

An additional hurdle is that key points are not identified though the authorities have said a new version of this law will require this to be done. The law prevented reporters and photographers from publishing reports and pictures about a security wall being built around the homes of the president and cabinet ministers at Bryntirion in Pretoria. The complex is a key point.

The law was also used against a *Beeld* reporter probing an internal disciplinary inquiry at the SA Broadcasting Corporation - which is a key point - into an alleged corruption charge against a senior SABC official.

In midyear, journalists were confronted by the Protection of Personal Information Bill to protect people's privacy. The SA National Editors' Forum (Sanef) noted that a censorship theme ran through this legislation and it would be exercised by the office of an Information Protection Regulator.

The very title is expressive of censorship. Among this official's roles is the regulation of the flow of personal information across borders - in other words, the power to prevent information from being disseminated. Other terms raising the spectre of censorship are "processing limitation", "exemption from information protection principles" and "information protection officer", said Sanef. Many institutions and authorities are exempted from the Bill - which detracts from the principle that laws should be of general application. One exemption is for publications which are subject to a "code of ethics" that provides adequate safeguards for the "protection of personal information".

This is quite valueless as no journalist organisation - even those subscribing to the Press Ombudsman's code - would comply with that undefined measure. A wide range of other publications including those from overseas would also not be exempted. In any event, journalists shy away from such special exemptions because they do not want special powers and fear the establishment of a journalists' register.

This was followed by the Protection from Harassment Bill, drafted by the SA Law Reform Commission to deal with "stalkers". Sanef objected to this because it places a prohibition on the conduct of journalists seeking information about people in the news and thus the media's legitimate role in the community.

The definition of harassment means directly or indirectly engaging in conduct that causes harm or inspires the reasonable belief that harm may be caused by unreasonably following, watching, pursuing or accosting the complainant, or loitering outside of or near the building or place where the complainant resides, works, carries on business, studies or happens to be.

Harassment is also engaging in verbal, electronic or other communication aimed at the complainant or sending, delivering or causing the delivery of letters or other objects to the complainant. Sanef states that in seeking to obtain information from, or in confronting, a person who is the subject of public interest inquiry, especially if the person refuses to face legitimate media questioning, journalists may be required to adopt the conduct outlined in the Bill and the result could be an appearance before court.

The trick is the term, "unreasonable", which, however, may not protect the journalist.

Sanef is especially concerned at "secrecy" clauses which provide for the closure of courts hearing harassment cases and restrictions such as the injunction that "no information relating to the proceedings be published in any manner whatsoever".

Waiting in the wings is the Protection of Information Bill which was withdrawn in 2008 after intense opposition - with the promise of its return this year. The Act replaces the current restrictive Act which, in turn, replaced the Official Secrets Act. Sanef and a range of other civil society institutions said that instead of opening up the law, it was more restrictive.

The institutions unanimously objected to the Bill's over-wide definitions which enable information which should be in the public domain being classified as secret or top secret. One lawyer described it as "draconian stuff" that would prevent certain stories that had been published seeing the light. Virtually any issue in the "national interest" had to be "protected from harm".

In the last few weeks the Public Service Broadcasting Bill was presented to us and, as Professor Anton Harber outlined in *Business Day* on 3rd November, it appears to be the gateway to the ultimate form of censorship, a state broadcaster.

GUY WILLOUGHBY

By Harvey Tyson

Guy Willoughby, aged 53, historian, playwright, critic, songwriter, and sharply barbed commentator, died of AIDS-related complications in Cape Town recently. He had "decided not to live".

Next morning, the *Cape Times*, in reporting his untimely death, described him as "brilliant, with an extremely intelligent, refined and critical mind".

"At his death he gave a marvellous performance. It was a demonstration on how to die," his ex-wife, poet and novelist Finuala Dowling, said. "I took our daughter to say goodbye. He had her support and those of his friends who queued to say their farewells. It was standing room only."

Guy seldom, if ever, gave a bad performance. He was a born actor. An extrovert. Yet a highly sensitive soul. A perceptive, yet sometimes searing, critic.

However, it was his specialist knowledge of history and his wide study of literature which had interested me for a decade before I met him. In 1999 he began writing a play about the founding of his country, to dramatise the history of South Africa and its direct relevance to the politics of today and tomorrow. Strangely, I found a preview of this play, *Africa Star*, within hours of his death. The 10-year-old newspaper cutting was deposited in my lap from a book that fell open off my shelf while I was looking for something else. The press cutting of 21 July 2000 quoted him as saying: "The key event in our history is not 1948 (when official apartheid was born) but 1910, because in 1910 racialism actually entered into the structure of the state." It was a subject that today's politically-aware South Africans either spurn, or turn away from in shame. Few know anything about it, except as a date in the history books. Guy was trying to popularise the historical record of scheming and betrayal that produced a modern nation in which 90% of the people were denied a vote. He presented the drama as a musical – complete with Edwardian music hall tunes!

I was attempting to tell the same story to oblivious South Africans with what was growing into a long and dry historical book. The talents and expert knowledge of Dr Guy Willoughby, lecturer in History and English at four universities, were needed to check my laboriously collected facts, and place them - unpolluted - into a popular dish of fiction.

We met less than a year before his death to deal with this literary recipe. Instead, we found ourselves in frenetic discussions over wine and lunches that lasted from noon-to-6pm. Countless hours sped by while we were supposed to be correcting my book, but talking instead about writers and historical characters; ethics and jurisprudence; Oscar Wilde, Tolstoy and Damon Runyon; philosophy and education;

In March, the Constitutional Court increased restrictions on reporting divorce cases, including the prohibition on identifying "any party or child" involved in such cases. This is being objected to. And then, to show that censorship is not limited to the state lawyers, parliamentary committees are starting to adopt the practice of holding secret hearings.



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theatre and politics – everything, including escapades we'd contrived in our separate pasts; anecdote piling upon anecdote. My manuscript, which he was supposed to be advising me on, was by mutual agreement, consigned to emailed correspondence.

What a guy! A spirit driven by an electrically-charged imagination, and filled with talents and bravura. A life in which he played many contradictory, but genuine, roles. He made me feel young again. But I thought I saw in him a strange vulnerability; an air of despair. Perhaps it was his broken marriage – he always spoke wistfully of his talented wife, and proudly of his teenage daughter. Whatever it was, he brushed it aside with, "I'm going through a bad time", and break back into laughter. It was something which he hid away, and revealed to no-one, I assumed.

I was wrong, of course. He had hidden it only from a man like me who was old enough to be his father, and from all the grey-suited people in his life. He was dying of AIDS, and refusing treatment.

Guy's memorial service on the UCT Campus was the best funeral I have attended in a long lifetime. It was sad, hilarious, raucous, witty, angry, lachrymose, sensitive and as unpredictably emotional and mixed-up as the man himself. Some saw the funerary rites simply as uplifting. Which I suppose is also true.

The event was staged in the Little Theatre on the UCT campus. It began with a movie about Guy against a soundtrack of his favourite Bob Dylan songs, and ended with a concert pianist playing Bartok, and an opera-singer rendering - in a rolling, deep bass - that once lascivious ditty, *The froggy-foggy-dew*. In between these set pieces, friends and family (actors, writers, producers and academics) recalled his life in what were emotional sketches more than speeches. His sister, in the midst of a witty, well-balanced tribute, suddenly burst out crying and ended with: "Anyway, we are supposed to be celebrating a short, but very full life – so you'd better have lots of drinks." His ex-wife told the congregated audience that she had always wanted to marry a man who appreciated intelligent women, and Guy appreciated intelligent women - as well as stupid women, as well as intelligent men and stupid men. He fell in love with them all. Numbers of written tributes – mainly from overseas - supported this view. We were reminded that "only Guy" would present the history of the founding of South Africa as a stage musical. He not only wrote the play, he directed the players, wrote the lyrics and composed the music... 27 songs! As he was preparing to die he was also preparing a screenplay of his first novel, *Archangels*.

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All speakers agreed that he was incredibly gifted and an extraordinary exhibitionist – a quality which a majority of them adored. They remembered him as grabbing zestfully and with furious imaginativeness, every moment of life. They painted him as at once irresistible; pugnacious, and an entertainer who believed he should never pay for lunch. I recognised instantly his achievement of never paying. And none of the other fulsome praises and criticisms of his attributes and his style seemed to strike a false note with his funerary audience. One new quality I learned of him was that he was a *dominant* leader of his pack, at school, university and later, in all kinds of rebellious or simply outrageous escapades. (I had assumed he was a loner).

A member of the family warned early on in his memorial service: “Guy told me that if he were to assemble all his different varieties of friends in one room, there would be chaos. Welcome to this chaos.” Indeed there were dry history lecturers;

voluble and gossipy actors, tightlipped female writers; young and old observers; scruffy; elegant, gay, straight and lesbian friends of the dead critic and impresario.

The image I shall remember of this occasion is of Guy's daughter, a self-possessed petite 15-year-old with blonde tresses who – adapting the quips of Guy's favourite author, Oscar Wilde – said of her father: “He believed that nothing succeeded like excess, and that moderation was a bore. He possessed not only talent, but genius. He gave his talent to writing, and his genius to living.”

It seems fitting that this two-hour funerary function has been being recorded on film. I suppose it will be titled *A Great Guy*. It would be worth re-seeing, for the laughs, the insights, and the talents of everyone involved.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

- ❖ London Book Fair – 19th to 21st April 2010. Visit www.londonbookfair.co.uk for more information. The Market Focus at this event will be on South Africa.
- ❖ Franschhoek Literary Festival – 14th to 16th May 2010. Visit www.flf.co.za for more information.
- ❖ The National Arts Festival – Grahamstown – 20th June to 4th July 2010. Visit www.nationalartsfestival.co.za for more information.
- ❖ Cape Town Book Fair – 30th July to 2nd August 2010. Visit www.capetownbookfair.com for more information.
- ❖ 10th International Literature Festival Berlin – 15th to 26th September 2010. The focus of this year's festival is Eastern Europe. Visit www.berlinerfestspiele.de for more information.
- ❖ Frankfurt Book Fair – 6th to 10th October 2010. 290 469 visitors attended the 2009 Fair. Visit www.buchmesse.de for more information.

The following publications have been received by SA PEN. Should you wish to read any of them please contact Deborah on rudebs@icon.co.za / tel. (021) 701-8510.

- ✓ Carapace 75 and 76
- ✓ Catalan Writing, 6 June 2009 (Newsletter from Catalan PEN)
- ✓ “in focus”, Volume 6, No. 3, September 2009 – A quarterly magazine on literature, culture and the arts in Cyprus
- ✓ Italian PEN Club magazine No. 5 (October–December 2008), No. 6 (January–March 2009), No. 7 (April–June 2009), and No. 8 (July–September 2009). (all received by email)
- ✓ Sydney PEN News, Views & Events, 18th August 2009, 22nd October 2009 (all received by email)
- ✓ The Taipei Chinese PEN – A quarterly journal of contemporary Chinese literature from Taiwan, No. 147, Spring 2009 and No. 148, Summer 2009

SA PEN AT WORDFEST, GRAHAMSTOWN NATIONAL FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS, 2009

By Peter Merrington

Peter Merrington was asked to represent SA PEN at the 2009 National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, with a short address to the audience at the launch session of the Wordfest.

This took place on Monday, 6th July. The launch of Wordfest began with a procession of writers (mostly isiXhosa-speaking) through the centre of the town, and a placing of manuscripts on a special cairn. Then came an extended session in the auditorium, at which Dr Saleem Badat, Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University, addressed the audience, followed by a speech from the Eastern Cape Minister of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture, the Hon Ms Xoliswa Tom. These addresses were enlivened by the responses of praise singers. After this, representatives of literary organisations were given a very brief time to present information about their respective societies. These included a speaker from the National Ministry of Arts and Culture, the Pan-South African Language Board, the SA Library for the Blind, the Centre for the Book, Exclusive Books, and SA PEN.

Peter Merrington was allowed all of two minutes for his presentation and managed to engage the audience who were under a marathon session of two and a half hours, by announcing information about the PEN/Studzinski award. He also spoke of the charter values and mission of PEN International and the supportive role that SA PEN plays for writers. Most of the audience were isiXhosa-speaking, and they showed a lively interest in the short story competition. Merrington was approached for contact information which he gave to interested writers. Most of those interested would have

preferred to submit stories in isiXhosa but were appreciative of the need for a single-language rule considering that submission is open to all writers on the continent.

The marathon session proceeded thereafter with a speech by the South African Poet Laureate, Professor Keorapetse Kgositsile, and a speech from Mandla Langa, recipient of the African regional award in the 2009 Commonwealth Prize awards.

SA PEN acknowledges with admiration the organisation of Wordfest by Chris Mann, Professor of Poetry at Rhodes University, and the huge stimulus this writers' festival has upon writers of all backgrounds in the Eastern Cape.



Peter Merrington

ENGLISH ACADEMY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA AWARDS

By Geoffrey Haresnape

On 12th August 2009, two members of the SA PEN Centre received awards at a ceremony held at UCT's Baxter Theatre by the English Academy of Southern Africa.

Gus Ferguson, the well-known publisher of South African poetry, was the recipient of the Academy's highest honour, a Gold Medal, given on the ground of conspicuous service for the cause of English over a number of years. The citation noted: 'For a long period of time Ferguson has been known to poets and poetry lovers across the country for his support and encouragement of the art of verse. This he has achieved by editing and producing poetry magazines, and by publishing individual collections.' It concluded: 'without Gus Ferguson's inspirational contribution, South African poetry in English, and South African poets, would not be where they are today. At a

time when the larger commercial publishers would barely touch poetry, he consistently filled the gap.'

Darrel Bristow-Bovey received the 2008 Percy Fitzpatrick Prize for Youth Literature. The citation was read by Professor Stan Ridge and the award presented by Professor Geoff Haresnape. In his acceptance speech, Bristow-Bovey spoke of his pleasure in having children as his target audience, enlarging upon their enthusiasm and spirited response to situation and character. An appreciative audience, made up of friends of the awardees and Western Cape members of the English Academy, were invited by its President, Dr Barbara Basel, to end the evening with refreshments and wine generously sponsored by Professor Mark Solms of the Solms-Delta Wine Estate.

EGYPTIAN INSPIRATION

By Isabella Morris

I am in the fortunate position of travelling for leisure and for travel-writing assignments, but the real bonus of travelling to worldwide destinations is the benefit to my fiction writing. During an anniversary trip to Mauritius I took a bus drive to Port Louis and I sat behind an elderly woman and her young grandchildren; the inspiration I drew from watching their interaction resulted in the short story *Bluette* which was published in SA PEN's anthology *New Writing from Africa 2009*.

Whilst travelling I always observe far more than I can include in the travelogues that I write for newspapers and magazines, and these observations invariably end up in a short story, poem or novel.



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In February this year I visited Egypt as a delegate on a press trip. Although many Egyptians struggle for survival, I was amazed at how few street children there were. Upon my return to South Africa I did some research and discovered that Egypt has a serious social issue of abandoned children. Further research revealed that adoption is not encouraged in Muslim societies and that the Egyptian authorities provide state-run orphanages for their abandoned children, educate them and give them a decent financial stipend to prepare them for independence once they reach adulthood.

The seed for my new novel had been planted and I returned to Egypt in June for a month to carry out research. Every approach I made to orphanages to work there for the month were met with refusal, some declined to give reasons, but mostly I think the orphanage superintendents sought to protect their charges. So I spent my time discussing the issues around orphans with Egyptians – abandonment, cultural and religious approaches to adoption, unwed mothers and fostering of children. The Egyptian viewpoints and ideas and stance on orphans are so radically different to my own and I found myself grappling with some of the concepts. However, suffice to say that most of the children who are rescued from the street are provided with the basic necessities and access to education, which many South African children are not.

Part of my daily ritual was to breakfast at a local restaurant and during the last week of my stay I was introduced to a little boy, the hitherto invisible runner who used to run to the nearest vendor to buy me airtime or cigarettes. That night I tossed and turned, unable to sleep in the 40 degree heat, and as I closed my eyes I became aware of the presence of the young Mohamed,

the vendor I'd met earlier in the day, standing at the end of my bed in his black trousers, black waistcoat and bow tie, his gap-toothed smile and cow-lick unmistakable in the greyness of the early morning. The main character in my novel had announced himself. Before I fell asleep, several more characters, people I'd barely noticed and some I was unable to keep my eyes off, slipped silently into the room, announcing the roles they would play in the novel. It always happens this way. For weeks I seem unable to weave the disparate thoughts and ideas that come to me, and then suddenly, in the middle of the night, a single character appears and an entourage draws in for support and while sleep rescues me, their stories come.

Mohamed's story would not have come to me if I'd been lying in my bed in the heart of Barbieland in Bedfordview. It came to me because I had walked the same sandy streets as my young character, had to gap it through the impatient doors of the Metro underground like an Egyptian schoolchild, because I had been chased by a pack of starving dogs down the alley next to the railway line, because I watched Egypt win and lose soccer matches in the Confederation Cup surrounded by loyal Egyptians urging their team on.

When you live with people, you experience a different side of the country. I wouldn't have such a rich background against which to set my new novel if I'd relied on my initial trip to Egypt; sitting with my legs drawn up in an uncomfortable tourist bus where I can't smell, or hear, or taste, or walk the cities and towns. That 8-day familiarity trip wouldn't have allowed the all-encompassing tactile experience that will inform the setting of my latest novel.

WITS POETRY SLAM

By Gail Dendy

On Wednesday 23 September 2009 on the Wits University Campus, at a specified time of exactly 19h30, there was a lift off. A large crowd of people gathered under the glare of spotlights to witness this event – an event never before seen on campus or in the surrounding area. Representatives of the media were on hand to report on the amazing happening, photographs were taken and the event was filmed for posterity. Afterwards, everyone agreed that life would never be the same again.

Well, perhaps this last sentence is something of an exaggeration, but then again, I hope not! So, you ask, 'what was this event that generated so much interest?' None other than the metaphorical fireworks of a Johannesburg dual between 'The Potholes' and the 'Spare Tyres'. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, let me fill you in. The Event is known as a Poetry Slam (or Bekgeveg), and was an evening of poetry at the Wits Downstairs Theatre, generated and hosted by the dapper Professor Leon de Kock, HOD of Wits School of Literature and Language Studies, and Demos 'Mal kafee Griek' Takoulas.

Although over 100 Slams have been performed in South Africa, this was Wits' initiation to the rites of ... well ... Poetry Writes. Six poets were invited to participate, divided into two teams: the 'Spare Tyres' comprising Veronique Tadjo (multi-award-winning Francophone African author from the Ivory Coast), Comrade Fatso (white Zimbabwean Toyi Toyi poet/political activist/musician) and Johannes (JC) van Jerusalem (controversial Boere-poet, author of *Eros Ontbind*), who squared up to 'The Potholes' comprising Lesego Rampolokeng (veteran SA revolutionary poet and author of *Bavino Sermons* and *Whiteheart*); Ike Mboneni Muila (Iscaimtho language-mixing iconoclast) and myself (billed as author of six poetry collections, but I'd prefer to call myself the 'word-unworded poet' since my dancing and my writing share so many integral characteristics – indulge me here, but wasn't it Anna Pavlova*** who remarked: "If I could say what I wanted to in just so many words, I wouldn't go to the very great trouble of dancing it". As far as I'm concerned, the same goes for poetry, a medium that draws upon, and speaks as much to, the subconscious as to the conscious, and so I maintain that poetry should be understood with one's fingertips and nerve-endings as well as with the heart and mind.

But back to the Event. The two teams, as if in a boxing match, square off to each other in three rounds of performed poetry. Each poet has two rounds in which to read one of their already

extant poems, while the third – Heavyweight Division – requires each poet to compose a piece on stage and in full view of the audience within a 10-minute period, this occurring while the proceedings of other rounds are in full swing. That's for starters, but throwing a spanner in the works of the Spare Tyres and the Potholes is the fact that the topic for each round derives solely from the audience who are encouraged to break all the rules of polite theatre, to be rowdy, to express their views and opinions, to shout out, answer back, heckle, boo, cheer, laugh and, last but not least, to judge the poems on a scale from 5-10. A score-keeper tallied the scores, and each round was preceded by two Wits Dramatic Arts students (changing each time into different/exotic/elaborate and marvellously colourful costumes) carrying the appropriate number placards. Topics, ranging from Sweat, to Skin, to Taxi Drivers, to Food, to Love-And-Death were moderated by the tuxedoed and bow-tied Leon, and proceedings were brought to humorous fever pitch by Demos in his bright-yellow, free-flowing, hi-fidelity, daisy-print shirt, on which the audience (in great mirth) was also allowed to vote. After all, this was *A Show*, which is why I decided to enliven the proceedings by catching Veronique by surprise and asking her to learn a dance, and drawing Demos and a willing audience member into the performance area to participate. Comrade Fatso, in turn, moved onto automatic pilot by dispensing with the page altogether, approaching the mike and reeling off his poems there and then. And JC, by canny sleight of tongue, managed to convince the audience that his poem about the birth of a baby was fully consonant with the topic 'Food', explaining that a baby is 'the fruit of the womb'. Finally, with many smiling faces both on-stage and off, the verdict was in: Spare Tyres (with a bit of help from the umpire) won by two points.

And so this was how poetry, for two hours during that almost-Spring evening, was lifted completely off the page and how it re-established itself in the minds of the audience as a living, visceral, breathing thing of fire and water, of air and soil, of dust and sweat. For poetry exists in the Landscape of the Now, and in the theatre that night I was grateful to be able to share in that rowdy and chaotic journey that led unswervingly beyond its borders.

*** Admittedly, this quotation has been ascribed to a wide diversity of dancers, including both ballet and contemporary.