

Article

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compiled and introduced by

Crystal Warren

Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, Grahamstown, South Africa

# Introduction

We are living in strange times; looking back on the literature of 2019 in mid-2020, only a few months ago, it already seems a different world. By the time this issue of the Journal of Commonwealth Literature appears, at the end of 2020, we might be in yet another world again. Before turning to the literature, it is worth noting the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic, and specifically the South African lockdown, have had on the literary reception and the writing of this article. South Africa went into a national lockdown at the end of March. While some restrictions have eased, it is likely to be months before gatherings will be allowed. Schools, universities and libraries remain closed.

With printing, publishing and retail shut down for several weeks, all book launches, festivals and other literary events cancelled, and most media focused on health matters, it has been difficult for new works to reach readers. In writing this article, I am limited in the access to books and articles and am aware that there will be gaps and omissions. On the other hand, writers, publishers and others in the book chain have been innovative and creative, with festivals, book launches, readings and discussions moving online. It remains to be seen what the long-term impact will be on the literary scene. In light of calls for submissions for creative anthologies and special issues of critical journals, it is likely that Covid-19 will feature in next year's literature.

In the poetry section quality wins over quantity. While not a lot of poetry is listed, each collection is significant. It is once again worth noting the small independent poetrun publishers keeping poetry alive – Modjaji, Deep South, uHlanga, Dryad and Botsotso, with Lebogang Mashile's *Mama's Shadow* and Mongane Wally Serote's *Sikhahlel'u-OR* the only collections to be published by South African commercial publishers. Serote was shortlisted for the Elizabeth Eybers Prize for Poetry. Mangaliso Buzani won the international Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry for his collection *A Naked Bone*. This is Buzani's second collection but his first in English. Debut collections appeared from

Musawenkosi Khanyile, Maneo Mohale, Andile Ecalpar Nayika, Mxolisi Dolla Sapeta and Tony Voss. *Scrim* is Haidee Kotze's third collection, though the first under this name, the previous collections having appeared under the name Haidee Kruger. The work of Sydney Clouts (1926-1982) has been brought back into print by Dan Wylie who edited and published *Seahorn Messiah*.

Wylie, together with Patrica Schonstein, edited *Naturally Africa*, an anthology of poems with an environmental theme. Another themed anthology is *Coming Home*, edited by Harry Owen, which contains poems by writers from or with links to Grahamstown. The nineth annual *Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology* appeared, containing poems in many South African languages, although all poems in other languages are translated into English. Makhosazana Xaba, who has her own collection *The Alkalinity of Bottled Water*, edited an impressive work of criticism: *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000-2018*. Xaba draws on the recent explosion of work by black women poets and the lack of critical attention (in the previous bibliography only three black women poets were represented in Studies on Individual Writers) to bring together critical articles, personal essays and interviews.

Koleka Putuma has adapted a poem from her 2017 collection *Collective Amnesia* into a play *No Easter Sunday for Queers*, which won the 2019 Distell Playwriting Award. Nadia Davids' *What Remains* won a Fleur de Cap Award for best new South African play in 2018. Other noteworthy plays in print are Jennie Reznek's *I Turned away and She Was Gone* and Amy Jephta's *All Who Pass*. Jephta, along with Yvette Hutchinson, edited *Contemporary Plays by African Women*, including Koleka Putuma and others. Theatre was well served in the criticism with two substantial publications: *A Century of South African Theatre* from Loren Kruger and a collection of essays *Forays into Contemporary South African Theatre* edited by Marc and Jessica Maufort.

A new novel from J. M. Coetzee is always worth noting. *The Death of Jesus* completes the *Jesus* trilogy and has been highly praised. Simon struggles to understand the increasingly messianic David and his strange mission, and to find meaning in the boy's life and death, while different followers of David contest his legacy. While much has been made of the themes of memory and meaning, it is also a moving portrayal of love and loss. Set in a Spanish speaking world, the Spanish translation of the novel was released before the original English.

Coetzee has employed intertextuality in many of his works, and this one, apart from the Jesus references, features *Don Quixote*. With Coetzee casting a long shadow over South African literature, it is perhaps no surprise that authors are increasingly writing back to his works. In *Lacuna* Fiona Snyckers speaks back to *Disgrace*, giving a voice to Lucy Lurie, depicted as a rape survivor struggling with PTSD and coping with the added trauma of having had a novel written about her experience. Snyckers won the 2020 Humanities and Social Sciences Award for her novel. Elleke Boehmer gives voice to another female character from *Disgrace*, Soraya, in one of the stories in her collection *To the Volcano*. Several of the stories speak back or reference other works. Siphiwo Mahala engages with several South African authors in his collection *Red Apple Dreams*. The short stories are strong this year, with impressive debuts from Jo-Ann Bekker and Keletso Mopai, a posthumous collection from Marion Baxter, and new collections from Henrietta Rose-Innes, Marlene van Niekerk and Fred Khumalo. There are two themed

anthologies: *Hair* and *Hotel Africa* and a third *Fools Gold* made up of stories drawn from the anthologies or individual collections published by Modjaji.

Fred Khumalo also has a novel, one of several historical novels to appear. *The Longest March* is set in 1899 against the backdrop of the South African War and the historical event of seven thousand Zulu miners walking 500 kilometres from Johannesburg to Natal after war has broken out and the mines are closed. Karen Jennings sets her *Upturned Earth* in 1886 in a mining town in Namaqualand. Zakes Mda's *The Zulus of New York* focuses on a group of South African men, taken to America by the Great Farini to perform as Zulu dancers and ethnographic displays. Marguerite Poland's *A Sin of Omission* is set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and follows a young black man trained in England as an Anglican priest and his conflicting loyalties between his culture and the church. The novel was shortlisted for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, not yet awarded at the time of writing.

The more recent past is represented in several novels set in the 1970s to the 1990s, with characters looking back at or being forced to confront their past. Most significantly Ivan Vladislavic's *The Distance* follows a schoolboy in the 1970s who obsesses about Muhammed Ali and his adult self as he attempts to use his boyhood scrapbooks to recreate a story about his life and family. Trevor Sacks sets his debut novel *Lucky Packet* in the 1980s, a coming of age of a young English-speaking Jewish boy in an Afrikaans town. Sacks won the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for English Fiction. Nedine Moonsamy's debut novel *The Unfamous Five* follows five Indian teenagers over a decade as they deal with the effects of witnessing an act of violence in 1993. Finuala Dowling sets her most recent novel *Okay, Okay, Okay* against the backdrop of the recent student protests which swept across universities.

If the past is a setting for many novels, so too is the future. *Triangulum* by Masande Ntshanga embraces both trends, moving from the 1990s to the early 2040s. Nominated for a Nommo Award for African Speculative Fiction the novel blurs genres, mixing historical fiction, bildungsroman and science fiction. *The Book of Malachi* by T. C. Farren is set in the near future where a mute refugee is hired to work in an illegal operation using criminals to grow and harvest organs. On one level a thriller, it also explores issues of guilt and redemption. Louis Greenberg's *Green Valley* is a thriller set in a near future where most of society has rejected technological surveillance, except for enclaves that operate almost entirely in virtual reality, with inhabitants losing their grip on reality. In *The Woman of the Stone Sea* by Meg Vandermerwe a fisherman catches a strange water being and discovers that the line between the magical and the real is very fine. Fantasy novels of note appear from Kerstin Hall, whose *The Border* was nominated for a Nommo Award and Nerine Dorman's *In the Company of Birds*. Dorman is one of several authors, including Fiona Snyckers and Marita van der Vyver, writing for both teenagers and adults.

Science fiction and fantasy dominate the youth literature. Dorman's youth novel of a future where humans and aliens coexist, *Singing down the Stars* received a Nommo Award nomination and won Gold in the Sanlam Award for Youth Literature. The Silver Sanlam award went to Toby Bennet for *The Music Box*. Mary Watson's *Wickerlight* is a sequel to her debut novel *The Wren Hunt*, set in the same world but following different characters, and once again drawing on Irish myths in an urban fantasy novel. Helen Brain completed her *Elevation* series with *The Fiery Spiral*, blurring dystopian fiction with fantastic

elements. Fiona Snycker's youth novel *Trinity on Track* moves between past and present as Trinity tries to solve a 60-year-old mystery revolving around the ghost she encountered in *Team Trinity* while negotiating the challenges of contemporary teenage life.

Edyth Bulbring also moves between past and present in *The Choice between Us* (one of the few non-speculative fiction youth novels). She won the MER Prize for Youth Literature for the second time with her novel of secrets and betrayal which moves between 1960s and present-day Johannesburg. Marita van der Vyver has a youth novel *All I Know* first published in Afrikaans in 2015 as well as an adult novel *Borderline*, which appeared simultaneously in Afrikaans and English. Ingrid Winterbach's *The Troubled Times of Magrieta Prinsloo* is another noteworthy translation from Afrikaans. It is pleasing to see two books not translated from Afrikaans; T. J. Pheto's *Botlodi* translated from Setswana and B. M. Khaketla's *She's to Blame* translated from Sesotho.

The non-fiction is dominated by memoir and autobiographies. Authors Elsa Joubert, Jennifer Friedman and Nataniël have memoirs. South Africa's apartheid past is an ongoing feature, with several memoirs of anti-apartheid struggles, including priest Peter Storey's *I Beg to Differ*, Carsten Rasch's *Between Rock and a Hard Place*, which tells of the alternative music scene in the 1980s, and Wilhelm Verwoerd's *Verwoerd* which explores the legacy of being Hendrick Verwoerd's grandson and the complexities of family and politics. Ronnie Kasril's memoir of his development into an activist and a collection of Robert Sobukwe's prison correspondence add insight into those dark days. The multicultural nature of South Africa is reflected in memoirs exploring identity, most notably in Yusuf Daniels' *Living Coloured (Because Black & White Were Already Taken)* and Ming-Cheau Lin's *Yellow and Confused*, on growing up Chinese in South Africa.

2019 saw the sad loss of several writers: Charl J. F. Cilliers, Sandile Dikeni, Ahmed Essop, Peter Horn, Harry Kalmer and Hugh Lewin.

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