

## South Africa

Compiled by

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## Introduction

Broadly speaking, the measures of economic recovery taken in South Africa after the pandemic have not been sufficient to overcome structural constraints such as large-scale scheduled power outages, unemployment (particularly affecting the youth and marginalised groups) and weak management of state enterprises, causing transport and logistical problems with service-delivery. These aspects, along with poverty, inequalities, corruption, xenophobia and persistent gender-based violence continue to create an atmosphere of disillusionment that percolates into some of the literary works, such as Morabo Morojele's *Three Egg Dilemma*, which demonstrates the dissolution of personal and communal integrity through poverty, street life and pervasive violence and Tebello Mzamo's *I Did Not Die*, about the realities of mineworkers and their families [both **Fiction**]. However, one can perhaps read hope in how artists and critics continue to grapple with such realities and with the influence of the past on our present.

In 2023 the literary community in South Africa mourned the passing of, among others, the poet Jonty Driver, who went into exile in the mid-1960s; the writer Simphiwe Nolutshungu, who won a South African Literary Award for his isiXhosa poetry collection; the historian and novelist Dan Sleigh, known mostly for historical fiction set during the early period of the Cape Colony; novelist and scriptwriter Kole Omotoso; poet David Friedland; poet and journalist Jeremy Gordin; novelist Johan Jack Smith; children's author Martie Preller and Jane Taylor, an award-winning writer who was involved in the Handspring Puppet Company's production of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*.

We celebrated the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Sindiwe Magona. A tributary anthology, *Sindiwe's Gift*, and a collection of her own essays, *I Write the Yawning Void* [**Non-Fiction**], were published. A conference was held in her honour, online and at Georgia State University

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in Atlanta, USA, and Amazwi opened an exhibition titled “A Conscience for the Nation”, speaking to her role in addressing societal issues through her writing. Also pointing to the capacity of his work to provide strength and motivation to fight for liberation, Keith Gottschalk was honoured with the presidential Order of Ikhamanga in Silver for his performative political poetry. Writers whose work garnered a monograph or special issue of a journal dedicated to their work were J.M. Coetzee, Damon Galgut (specifically on his Booker Prize-winning *The Promise*), Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Lesego Rampolokeng, Ari Sitas and Marlene van Niekerk. All these writers work in prose, with Rampolokeng and Sitas also known for their poetry.

Publishing the collected works of Jonas Ntsiko, Edwin T. Smith, Victor Wessels, Robert Grendon and Keorapetse Kgositsile gives much needed gravitas to the work of these black poets. Ntsiko, Smith and Wessels’ work is now available in bilingual editions. The small press Strandwolf particularly wishes to revitalise historical African texts and does so through Grendon’s *Paul Kruger’s Dream and Other Poems*, an extended early work of literature written by a black South African. Composed while Grendon was in the British Army during the South African War (1899–1902), it details South Africa’s hostile race relations while beautifully rendering the country’s landscapes.

Poetry anthologies provide another platform for multilingual publication and the annual local anthologies *I Wish I’d Said* and *The Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology* continue this tradition. Small independent presses have published three quarters of the poetry collections this year, with Botsotso and Karavan Press taking the lead. It is notable that five collections were published outside the country, three of them by the University of Nebraska Press (Lincoln, USA). Established poets with three or more collections to their name who brought out new work in 2023 are P.R. Anderson, Isobel Dixon, Kerry Hammerton, Moira Lovell, Nick Mulgrew and Sihle Ntuli. Of these, Anderson’s *Night Transit* and Dixon’s *A Whistling of Birds* have already received some critical attention. Among the debut poets, Uhuru Portia Phalafala (who was also involved in editing Keorapetse Kgositsile’s *Collected Poems*) received acclaim for her *Mine Mine Mine*, originating in her family’s experience of the migrant labour system, and addressing racial capitalism and the histories of the transatlantic and trans-Indian slave trades, plantation economies and mining and prison-industrial complexes. Critical articles mostly focused on the legacy of individual poets, with themes such as aesthetic movements, literary form, memory and the effects of history being investigated.

Poetry can also be experienced as public readings and performances. Online platforms such as The Red Wheelbarrow and Off-the-Wall have become popular since lockdown and although much of what is deemed performance poetry overlaps with music and theatre, on occasion, published works have also been adapted to the stage. Mongane Wally Serote’s praise poem *Sikhahlel’u OR* has been adapted into a stage play that premiered at the State Theatre. It chronicles the life and times of Oliver R. Tambo, a human rights activist who served as president of the ANC from 1967 to 1991. Another literary work that has similarly been adapted is Damon Galgut’s novel *The Promise*. The play was acknowledged at the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards in the category of best new script (written by Galgut in conjunction with Sylvaine Strike).

More plays were published in anthologies or collections than as stand-alone works. There is a focus on gender identity and LGBTQI experiences. Fred Abrahamse and

Marcel Meyer's *Contested Bodies, or, Doctor James Barry, Lord Charles Somerset, and I* takes as subject the historical figure of Dr James Barry, a woman disguised as a man, who worked as a doctor in the Cape Colony. It won a Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for best performance as an ensemble. Pieter-Dirk Uys, whose collection brings together his one-man plays from 1992 to 1999, is South Africa's most famous cross-dressing satirist with alter egos Evita Bezuidenhout and Bambi Kellerman (opiniated Afrikaans sisters pointing out the foibles of a bigoted society). Sohail Booise's play looks at the disruption of relations between four male friends sharing a hostel room. *Gendering Taboos* compiles ten plays by African women around these themes [**Anthologies**].

Three monographs and various critical articles on theatre studies were published – an interest that seems to warrant the publication of more scripts to support this concern. These studies include theatre histories and analyses of specific plays by Lara Foot-Newton, Ronnie Govender, Lewis Nkosi and Koleka Putuma. Premesh Lalu's book *Undoing Apartheid* focuses on the work of William Kentridge and Jane Taylor with the Handspring Puppet Company (*Faustus in Africa, Woyzeck on the Highveld* and *Ubu and the Truth Commission*), which coincided with the end of apartheid, to support the argument that only an aesthetic education can lead to a post-apartheid future.

A concern with the influence of the past on the present and beyond is presented in many of the works of fiction. Some might be regarded as historical fiction in the sense of presenting a story from a particular time and place. For example, Barbara Townsend's *Out of Mind* brings to the fore Robben Island as a place of incarcerating lepers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Elwyn Bonhomme's *While the Land Burns* tells of two brothers on opposite sides of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s. Others reflect more pertinently on the continued presence of the past. Michael Boyd's gothic *The Weight of Shadows* considers the bearing of the past on our lives. Sarah Isaac's *Glass Tower* won the inaugural Island Prize for debut African fiction manuscripts (established by Karen Jennings in conjunction with Holland House Books and Karavan Press in honour of her novel *The Island* being longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2021) and tells the story of two girls at school in 1997, attempting a friendship amidst the difficulties of racial tension and secrets. Two more acclaimed debut novels, Sven Axelrad's *Buried Treasure* and Almini van der Merwe's *Ghost Limb*, also explore memory and the past seeping into who we are and where we belong. Craig Higginson's *The Ghost of Sam Webster* is a multilayered novel which presents family stories rooted in South Africa's violent histories echoing into a present where a woman has gone missing. It has been described as a war novel, a murder mystery, a love story and a robust reassertion of what it is to remain human during the most challenging times and it won the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Award for best novel.

A historical perspective can also be found in many of the critical articles. There are discussions on, among others, the effects of history in poems on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), life narratives of women in the liberation struggle, narrating apartheid state violence and reconsidering Sol Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary*. Many provide a historical context and analysis of specific works. South Africa's literary heritage is also being shaped through careful critical responses and the legacies of many writers from the past have been honoured by such consideration, among them Peter Abrahams, Eva Bezwoda, Herman Charles Bosman, R.R.R. Dhlomo, Nadine Gordimer, Ronnie Govender, Bessie Head, Dan Jacobson, Alex La Guma, David

Livingstone, Dalene Matthee, Fatima Meer, Casey Motsisi, Lewis Nkosi, Alan Paton, Sol Plaatje, Thomas Pringle, Olive Schreiner and Can Themba.

J.M. Coetzee must be the living South African writer most prominently inscribed into our literary history. He has received more than five times the amount of critical attention than any other writer this year and he has also published a new book, *The Pole and Other Stories*. The title story, a novella, has been reviewed in some detail, with its themes of art, aging and ethical responsibility. (The others, including a return of Elizabeth Costello as character, have been deemed less weighty.) An interesting aspect is that most of the stories have been published in translation first, as Coetzee wishes to question the assumption that English is the dominant or 'universal' language. Another way to include multilingual content in short fiction is to publish stories in more than one language, as was done in Tlotlisang David Mhlambiso's *A Journey Worth the Ride* and Nataniël's *Help, Help*, which include isiXhosa and Afrikaans, respectively.

Short stories were valued this year with at least three receiving HSS Awards. *Fluid: Short Stories: The Freedom To Be* originates from the annual Short.Sharp.Stories competition. Frankie Murrey's *Everybody Dies* is a series of stories described as prose poems. The stories in Dawn Garisch's *What Remains* journey into the oddities of the human heart and present characters in their flawed relationships with each other and the world.

Fiction with a contemporary focus on family, relationships, the workplace, society and being human in the world could perhaps be said to be conventional realist fiction, though narratives can include magical realism, shifts in perspective and fragmentation. Mothers and mothering are important in the anthology *Mother Bliss*; Lauren Beukes' new offering, *Bridge*; theatre-maker turned novelist Megan Choritz's *Lost Property*; Lisa Lazarus's *Flight of the Dancer* and Eben Venter's *Decima*, whereas fatherhood is addressed in S.J. Naudé's *Of Fathers and Fugitives* (translated from Afrikaans). Sibling relationships are the focus of Kara Gnodde's *The Theory of (Not Quite) Everything*, while Anne Schlebusch presents us with life in an old age home in *Bloomer*. Resurfacing childhood memories and recovering from trauma feature in Wisani Mushwana's coming-of-age novel *A Soft Landing*, whereas Gail Schimmel's *Little Secrets* and Jane van der Riet's *How to Hide Inside a Three* present marriage and family in crisis through the experiences of their female characters.

Moving on to society and the workplace, Nthikeng Mohlele, known for analytical and reflective narratives, published *A Little Light*, a collection of stories which has a more overt focus on contemporary global historical events and personalities, the nature of the human heart, politics, human mortality and the afterlife. Sarah Naidoo sends her journalist on an investigation into a pandemic in *A Remedy for Death*. Zibu Sithole's *The Thing with Zola* (and the novels by Janine Jellars and Busisekile Khumalo) might be described as popular romance but tackle present-day issues such as young women navigating the working world and celebrity culture. Sihle Qwabe's *The Resurrection* and Kaizer M. Nyatumba's *On the Precipice* provide a darker view, looking at political shenanigans and gangsters. Societal violence is also addressed in crime fiction, with stalwart Angela Makholwa putting a copy-cat serial killer on the streets in *The Reed Dance Stalker* and Tracey Hawthorne dealing with a missing woman in *Flipped*. Vernon Head's *On That Wave of Gulls* looks at relationships between men and women in a closed system of violence.

Several works of fiction take wars as their subject. Andrew Brown sets his crime novel, *The Bitterness of Olives*, amid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (his first novel to be set outside South Africa). Stephen Symons' *Afterburn* uses history and speculative techniques to present war stories. He examines the theme of armed conflict within different contexts: the South African Border War (1966-1989) (also the subject of Johan Vlok Louw's *Sons of Mud*), the Russo-Ukrainian war (2014-present) and a theoretical scenario set in the imminent future.

The critical literature reflects these complexities in a more formal way. Reading literature in terms of gendered perspectives or in terms of national/globalised social and political frameworks provide more overt analyses. Critical reviews focused on masculinities in Damon Galgut, Can Themba and Ivan Vladislavić's work and on fluid and queer gender identities in works of Mark Gevisser, Zinaid Meeran and Koleka Putuma. There were also studies on the representation of love relationships in works by Shaida Kazie Ali, Frank Anthony, J.M. Coetzee, and Marlene van Niekerk. Cultural studies lent a deeper understanding to works by Sindiwe Magona, Masande Ntshanga and Jolyn Phillips.

South African works have been read in conjunction with Russian, Irish and Jamaican ones and in relation to European and African American identities. Ideas of freedom and political transition were examined in works by Peter Abrahams, Nadia Davids, Fatima Meer, Nthikeng Mohlele and Gillian Slovo, among others. Post-colonial and decolonial understandings underpinned studies on writers as diverse as Ceridwen Dovey, Lesego Malepe, Zakes Mda, Olive Schreiner and Malaika Wa Azania. Racial identity and attitudes were foregrounded by studies on Haji Mahomed Dawjee's autobiographical work, Cynthia Jele's 'black South African chick lit', Alex La Guma's search for 'black freedom and beauty', Lewis Nkosi's drama and Kopano Matlwa's representation of 'post-apartheid anti-blackness', among others.

Meditating on writing and art is a theme in novels that present choices: in Barry Gilder's historical fiction *At the Fire Hour* a black man in exile is torn between studying poetry and using his military training in support of the struggle, whereas Ron Irwin's *My Side of the Ocean* places a character between life partners offering an artistic reawakening and a life of material ease. David Ralph Viviers' *Mirage* weaves themes of art, memory and landscape in a Karoo story, echoing the life and work of Olive Schreiner. Exploring writing, print and reading cultures provides a rewarding field of study this year. Attention has been given to black humour in South Africa between 1943 and 1963, writing in *Drum* between 1951 and 1960, the reading habits of high school students in Soweto between 1968 and 1976, censorship and the politics of the printed page in African studies.

Given the prominence of climate change and accompanying environmental and energy crises in current affairs, the past year's literature shows surprisingly little emphasis on these issues. Ashling McCarthy, Bridget Pitt and Eben Venter's novels take the plight of the rhino as their focus, with Venter's *Decima* being a complex work of varied voices (both past and present), considering social injustices impacting on the crisis and integrating storylines from Asia, Kenya and South Africa. An established Afrikaans novelist, this work formed part of a thesis on self-translation and includes auto-fiction as reflective technique.

Several books have a particular focus on place. Michiel Heyns' *Each Mortal Thing* and Buntu Siwisa's *Paperless* present a new view of London, with the latter looking at the plight of undocumented people in the UK. The stories in Zaheera Asvat's *The Tears of the Weaver* rethink social conventions and rules in the community of Lenasia. Peter Strangeways remembers Parktown, Johannesburg. Magogodi oaMphela Makhene's *Innards* consists of linked short stories set in Soweto, telling stories of everyday black people processing the savagery of apartheid.

Eco-critical studies were more wide-ranging. The most extensive ecological book in this field is *Syntax of the River: The Pattern Which Connects*, a record of an extensive interview between Julia Martin and Barry Lopez, two writers and environmental activists musing on human creativity and our intertwined lives on this planet [**Interviews**]. Justin Fox brought out *Place* on South African literary encounters, marrying his love for travel and writing [**Non-Fiction**]. The poet Dan Wylie produced two studies, one each on the representation of nature in poetry and early travelogues [**Criticism: General Studies & Studies on Individual Writers**]. Some writers whose work received eco-critical attention are Nadine Gordimer, Julia Martin, Zakes Mda, Niq Mhlongo and Henrietta Rose-Innes. Several critical studies also focused on place, such as the Karoo as presented in Carol Campbell's work, Durban as cultural space in an Imraan Coovadia novel and urban spaces in works by Alan Paton and Ivan Vladislavić.

A sense of place is also common in experimental auto-fiction. Kharys Ateh Laue's *Sketches* presents short pieces of lyrical prose on a visit to India, interspersed with drawings. Lethokuhle Msimang's *The Frightened* presents its themes of leaving and finding home and the significance of art in fragmented fashion, with Stacy Hardy's *An Archaeology of Holes* moving between fabulism and dark realism. Karen Lazar's *W Is for Witness* presents Johannesburg through articulate objects and animals. Nick Mulgrew also plays with different viewpoints in *Tunnel*, with ten people trapped in Cape Town's mountains. Mxolisi Nyezwa's *Bhlawa's Inconsolable Spirits* presents the realities of growing up and living in poverty and oppression in an Eastern Cape township in a poetic prose of disillusion. Concerns with literary form are the subject of academic works looking at the rise of the South African novel and the short story after apartheid, writing against colonialism in South African memoirs, as well as modes of presentation in specific works like the prison memoir in Herman Charles Bosman's work, the fantastic in Lauren Beukes and Zakes Mda's work and Thomas Pringle's sonnets.

Speculative fiction presents narratives where the premise or themes are noticeably alternative. Lauren Beukes considers parallel realities to explore grief in *Bridge*, Douglas Kruger presents a character who can smell corruption in *Character Scan* and Jarred Thompson tilts expectations with his *The Institute for Creative Dying*, where yearnings to the beyond and strands of corruption intertwine. Nthikeng Mohlele's *Breasts, etc.* uses a post-apocalyptic and desolate landscape to examine masculine vulnerabilities and wickedness in a world stripped of feminine presence and wisdom. *Bloody Parchment: Weeping Walls and Other Stories* and *Flow: FicSci 01* are anthologies of stories in alternative genres. In a critical approach, Gillian Armstrong examines a restructured post-apocalyptic geo-political future as presented in South African speculative fiction.

The futuristic, or at least modern life in the frame of artificial intelligence and social media features in *It's Always Friday Somewhere in the Universe* and *Twitter Dawn* by

Joe Kitchen (also known as André Letoit in an earlier literary career and Koos Kombuis as cultural rock icon). It can also be seen in Sally Partridge's *Leo Jantjies and the Esports World Championships* – aimed at the younger side of the young adult readership. Her atmospheric young adult novel *The Witches of Hogsback* is a present-day story of an outsider girl who investigates the death of a boy, with suggestions of the supernatural. The fantastical is perhaps a beloved mode in literature for young people and can be found in Cavan Barry's *Children of the Storm* and Tanya Junghans' *Dreamer: The Activation of Makeba*. These novels present young people learning to use their powers while learning from their (particularly African) heritage. The graphic novel *Pearl of the Sea* tells the story of a girl who meets a sea monster while abalone poaching. Most young adult novels this year, however, focus on friendships and relations, with five offerings in the long-standing Siyagruva (we are grooving) series – written by different authors but presenting stories from a cast of characters in a dance studio.

Among letters, auto/biographical and other literary-related non-fiction works of 2023 not yet mentioned, those with a particular appeal to the literary/arts world include a collection of Noni Jabavu's writing titled *A Stranger at Home* [**Non-Fiction**], Janet Hodgson's book on Ntsikana and his great hymn [**Letters and Auto/biography**], Darryl Earl David's *BookBedonnerd!* outlining the many book festivals he started and organised [**Letters and Auto/biography**] and two writing guides by Lisa Fugard and Janet van Eeden, respectively [both **Miscellaneous**]. *Written Out: The Silencing of Regina Gelana Twala* returns this prolific black woman of letters' work to South Africa's attention [**Letters and Auto/Biography**]. Other notable books with a struggle history background are Jonny Steinberg's *Winnie and Nelson: Portrait of a Marriage* and Mongane Wally Serote's work on Ruth Mompati [both **Letters and Auto/Biography**]. Justice Malala's *The Plot to Save South Africa: Chris Hani's Murder and the Week Nelson Mandela Averted Civil War* looks at where South Africa has come from, with a satirical take on current-day affairs provided by Sihle Khumalo's *Milk the Beloved Country* [both **Non-Fiction**], and collections of political cartoons by Zapiro and Stephen Francis & Rico [**Miscellaneous**].

Books on war take the South African War, the war in the Ukraine and World War II as subject, with Joanne Jowell's *I Am Ella: A Remarkable Story of Survival, from Auschwitz to Africa* and *The MiG Diaries* on air combat receiving praise [both **Letters and Auto/Biography**]. A focus on mothers continues in Siphokazi Magadla's *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa* [**Non-Fiction**]. Likewise, Herman Lategan's commended *Son of a Whore* presents a mother from an unusual social context [**Translations**]. The life stories of dancer Gregory Maqoma and Dolly Rathebe, 'queen of African jazz blues & mbaqanga' and a brother's memoir of the painter Walter Meyer are of interest to the arts world. Most of the other life stories come from the sphere of politics (for example André de Ruyter's exposé of Eskom), sports (Caster Semenya's *The Race To Be Myself*), the motivational (Louisa Zondo presenting a mother's journey through grief) or the sensational (Ted Botha's story of 1930s wife/murderess Daisy de Melker).

Historic figures whose auto/biographical work have been studied this year are Ruth First, Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela. Present-day life writing under critical scrutiny include Phumlani Pikoli, Marianne Thamm and Malaika Wa Azania's books, with the writer Elsa Joubert's account of her last years also receiving attention.

I conclude this summary by mentioning Ashwin Desai and Vahed Goolam's study *Durban's Casbah: Bunny Chows, Bolsheviks and Bioscopes* and Darrel Bristow-Bovey's *Finding Endurance: Shackleton, my Father and a World without End* [both **Non-Fiction**]. The Durban book has been praised not only for its historical and memory work, but for its restoration of a sense of vanishing wonder. *Finding Endurance* combines memoir and Antarctic journeys of discovery into a narrative that is simultaneously travel, adventure and a celebration of fallible humans, a fragile world and creating an enduring love on a personal level and legacy on a communal level, as literature strives to do.

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