

A NEW WAVE...



In South African publishing?

COLLEEN HIGGS

Programme Manager, Centre for the Book

Something is going on in South African publishing. It's not easy to pin it down. Is it a rustle in the undergrowth or is it a new wave? My experience as an avid life-long eclectic reader is that there is a new energy, a new attractiveness in South African (SA) books. I see piles of books everywhere, even at airport bookshops, for heaven's sake, that I want to buy.

Up to now, I have to confess, I've been a bit ambivalent about South African books. I've harboured that guilty feeling that I should be reading more of them than I actually was. I'd steer myself to the shelves that were helpfully marked South African fiction or Africana. I would dutifully browse those shelves and would eventually find something that I'd make a mental note of, 'I must see if the library has that'. I didn't find it easy to part with money for most of the books on those shelves. I'd find instead that I'd buy the latest Barbara Kingsolver, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison or a book like Mary Karr's **The Liar's Club**, a Don de Lillo, even a Sue Grafton or the latest Sara Paretsky. If I could find Wislawa Szymborska's poems or a collection of Raymond Carver's short stories, I would buy those. But rarely did I buy a South African book.

In doing Internet research on some of the local books I've loved, I came across others who had similar experiences with South African authors, if for different reasons. Hilly Pain wrote this to Deon Meyer on his web site: 'I have just

finished your book **Dead at daybreak** and must tell you that it was great. I hang my head in shame and admit that I avoid SA authors. Always these moody stories - the old farmhouse, the verkrampte parents and the daughter who falls in love with the black farmhand.'

Lately, I can't stop myself buying South African books, nor, it seems can my friends, with whom I share books. In the past couple of months I've bought or been lent by close book-swapping friends, books such as these: **People who have stolen from me** by David Cohen (Picador Africa), **Dead before dying** by Deon Meyer (Coronet) and **Bite of the banshee** by Muff Andersson (STE), all of which are lively, racy crime stories - perfect for a crime junkie. I was riveted by the following memoirs and autobiographical-style fiction: **Desert varnish**, Karen Cochlovius (Kwela); **All under heaven**, Darryl Accone (New Africa Books); **Gardening at night**, Diane Awerbuck (Secker & Warburg); **Kitchen**

casualties, Willemien de Villiers (Jacana); **Shirley, Goodness and Mercy**, Chris van Wyk (Picador Africa); and **Our generation** by Zubeida Jaffer (Kwela). In spite of some unevennesses, I've loved reading all of these; I didn't regret the money or time spent on them.

I talked to some of the publishers who are putting out the kind of gritty, realist, expressive fiction, memoirs, and creative non-fiction (in English) that appeals to me, to see if they also felt that there was a 'new wave' swelling and to discover if they could account for it. They all agreed that there is an unprecedented energy to be observed in the publishing field; they all had different ways of accounting for it. Annari van der Merwe of Kwela said that reading recently-published local books '...is like going on a trip, it's familiar and it's not familiar, you're confronted with the excitement of discovering what you thought you knew, but knew only in a very limited way.'

Dusanka Stojakovic (Picador Africa) accounts for it like this, 'I think it is a natural progression as a country moves out of a period of strife into relative peace and economic prosperity (**Angela's Ashes**, Mukiwa, **Don't let's go to the dogs tonight**). We are experiencing an explosion of creativity in all the arts.'

Van der Merwe notes that life in South Africa has become normalised, 'there is a lightness that's crept into SA writing that makes it more attractive', which she contrasts with the past where there was a perceived prescriptiveness about the struggle agenda. 'At one stage you could only publish in English if it was about the political situation ...if you didn't write and publish committed books about the political situation it was as though you weren't concerned about what was happening in the country; black writers will tell you that they feel liberated now, they can write about aspects of black reality that they couldn't before.' She adds, 'There is an air of freedom, an air of freedom of speech, political freedom and of not feeling pressured to be politically involved or politically active in your writing. There's a different Zeitgeist, it's a different time. It used to be an indulgence to write about something that's not worthy. We've shed that notion of worthiness in our writing.'

Jeremy Boraine, of Penguin suggests that this new wave can partly be understood as having 'to do with individuals who have a certain vision or will, publishers who have particular presence or skills: Annari van der Merwe has got particular passion and intelligence, so has Maggie Davey of Jacana. But you can't just explain it away as personality... Writers are grappling with issues that people can identify with, they are drilling down to small personal aspects of a particular life, which readers can readily relate to.'

Muff Andersson of Jacana pushes the argument further: 'Publishing is becoming much more sophisticated. A decade or so of research into emerging markets is being absorbed

'IT USED TO BE AN INDULGENCE TO WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING THAT'S NOT "WORTHY". WE'VE SHED THAT NOTION OF "WORTHINESS" IN OUR WRITING'

by publishers, resulting in different books for different audiences.' Andersson continues, 'efforts like the European Union Literary Award and the new PEN Novel Award have shown that there are communities of people - not just local publishers themselves, but funders, academics and perhaps most importantly, Nobel Prize winning authors, who want to get local publishing up and running (even though they publish outside of SA).'

Not only are the more established publishers taking risks, there are also new publishers and new imprints, like Picador Africa and Struik's Oshun Books and newish publishers, like Jacana and STE, that are taking risks with unusual voices and genres.

Stojakovic (Picador Africa) describes her publishing programme as 'a heady concoction of some of the best South African classics, mixed with new and exciting flavours provided by African writers and a satisfying helping of award-winning favourites. The long awaited cherry on the top is the biography of Professor Phillip Tobias.'

There are many more women writers, memoirs and autobiographies, stories of early life, and of healing, like Zubeida Jaffer's recent book, **Our generation**, where she is open about a topic that is usually taboo, her journey to healing as she worked with a psychiatrist to help her deal with the trauma and repression she had experienced in her life.

There is also the wry, confessional account of life in a full-blown dysfunctional family in the relatively small town of Kimberley, Diane Awerbuck's **Gardening at night**. Awerbuck's memoir has an affinity with some of the recent memoirs or autobiographical novels coming out of the United States, like those of Mary Karr or Dorothy Allison. Although it is lighter than either of those memoirs, it takes risks with form - short chapters with snappy titles and references to songs that somewhat leaves the reader to her own devices as Awerbuck skips through the years of her life, with few landmark dates or events to map the way. The effect is to leave the reader feeling a little lost in an individual consciousness, which may partly be the point.

Many recent books are no longer explicitly political or referential to apartheid. Barbara Erasmus's novel, **Kaleidoscope** (Penguin) explores the effect of an autistic child on her family, set very clearly in Johannesburg, in contemporary South Africa, but the country is a place, rather than a character in the novel.

People who have stolen from me, is a fascinating depiction of the complexities of life in Johannesburg now, full of wry humour, in a **New Yorker**-style documentary journalism. Cohen writes about 'crime' in a way that isn't the victimised dinner-party horror-story-brokering that it can often become.

Crime fiction is a genre which is crying out to be written more in South Africa, where everyday people tell each other true crime stories. Crime usually occurs at the place where harsh socio-economic realities are lived, the place where the underclass meet privilege. Crime fiction is a place of tragedy, crisis, and people dealing with things that have gone wrong. Boraine suggested I have a look at Deon Meyer (Coronet), a writer who uses the possibilities of crime fiction; his are set in Cape Town, and are steeped in a particular experience of the city. STE have recently published Muff Andersson's crime fiction novel, **Bite of the banshee**, or as

she describes it, the first of her post-apartheid pop trilogy. **Banshee** is one of those reads that you don't want to put down, it's a brisk, vibrant depiction of life in SA right now, her vivid characterisation utterly thrilling.

Struik is launching a new imprint, Oshun Books, in October 2004, and will be publishing books for and by women, in four main categories: biography, fiction, life-guides and gift/humour. 'It'll be like a South African Virago,' says Michelle Matthews, Oshun's new publisher. The imprint is named after the Yoruba goddess of beauty, intimacy and wealth. 'We're trying new things. To some degree commercial publishing in South Africa has been safe, particularly when it came to fiction. No one wanted to touch short story collections. Romantic or fantastical or personal novels weren't considered literary or relevant.'

Matthews says that the tone of Oshun's first books is frank, humorous, not too earnest and above all entertaining. Some exciting titles look set to come out before the end of the year: **Spite** by Katy Bauer and **This year's black** by Rosie Fiore, a wry tale set between London and Johannesburg about a woman who avoids absolutely none of the pitfalls of modern life.

Maggie Davey describes Jacana's publishing programme, as 'eclectic, but not without direction. We're strong on memoir, fiction, current affairs, history. But it's a developing list - we've only been going for two years. We have a growing women's list, which is feminist, womanist, and very much located in Africa. We have published some gay fiction and non-fiction, and would certainly see this as an important part of the list. We are developing a pamphlet series for 2005, which will be provocative and hopefully a little alarming. We are in the Pretoria High Court over a freedom of speech issue regarding a future publication on the murder of Dulcie September... So we certainly like to publish books that other publishers might shy away from. We are members of the international independent publishers' alliance, and our independence is a very strong driver for us.'

Annari van der Merwe explains her publishing programme like this: 'I always use the image of the jigsaw puzzle and there are certain parts of South African reality that are filled in in great detail, there aren't any gaps there, but there are other whole blank bits and that's what we try to fill - those blank bits. Kwela, ten years old this year, focuses on three main areas - literary fiction, good fiction, we've published some prominent writers...as well as memoirs and personal stories, not the big political figures - more often very ordinary people, and we do non-fiction, with a cultural slant, recording aspects of SA reality or life or history that has up to now not been explored sufficiently.'

Perhaps libraries will open their shelves to this new flowering of South African writing and will nurture the new wave by buying all these books in quantities that will make even more space available for new books.



2004