

Open Book 2012

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As indicated in the Sept/Oct edition of the *CL*, Dr Verster highlights aspects discussed by Antjie Krog and Prof Njabulo Ndebele and the topic, *Should literature be political?* The discussion was led by Judith February.

In 1962 leading Scottish authors of the time, Rebecca West, Muriel Spark, Lawrence Durrell and Norman Mailer, amongst others, gathered to discuss issues around writing and society, in what became a defining moment in the history of international literary dialogue and debate.

This event, the Edinburgh Writers' Conference, grew into the Open Book Festival and this year, half a century later, Cape Town is (for the second time) included in the around-the-world tour which will culminate with the last event in the city where it started 50 years ago. This year the theme was *The role of literature in contemporary life*, presented by Open Book in partnership with the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the British Council. (Also visit www.edinburghworldwritersconference.org)

I decided to attend a couple of discussions, the first being, *Should literature be political?* on Thursday evening, 20 September 2012. Aptly, it was a dark and stormy night. When I entered the Fugard Theatre just a stone's throw from the District Six Museum, I was immediately struck by the charmingly old-world ambience

of this relatively new establishment. Stunning, as my wife would say, with its striking décor, but let's move away from the stone throwing metaphors, *The Struggle* is in the past . . . or is it? (Not according to many South Africans, including some authors who attended this event.)

On stage were Antjie Krog, who literally needs no intro-

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▲ *Should literature be political?* A discussion led by Judith February, Antjie Krog and Njabulo Ndebele

duction, and not less so Prof Njabulo Ndebele, also a writer and academic of note. Judith February was the facilitator, and I saw several noteworthy opinionmakers in the audience, such as André P Brink and Margie Orford.

Both Ndebele and Krog delivered keynote addresses after which they fielded questions from the notably knowledgeable audience – some introduced as 'emerging authors', in other words not old fogies: thus, a good mix of wisdom and enthusiasm in attendance.

According to Ndebele the question of whether there is a place for politics in literature is a timeless one. One could also ask why are we asking this question? Anyway, locally the role of politics in literature (rather arts in general) was evident since 1976 and the escalation of oppression during the 1990s. He joked that politics during this era had the clarity of a soap opera – good against evil.

Writers acted as cultural workers. Poetry flourished; heroically peaceful as opposed by the violence of the regime, as seen by the supporters of The Struggle.

At present South Africa is free and apartheid is dead, so why ask this question again? 'The new order asks for reflection, with the immediacy of political actions,' Ndebele said. Also, it should be understood that 'non-political literature can be intensely political through exploding simplicity'. Non-political literature can be seen as ennobling, while political literature seems to devalue, like William Golding's **Lord of the flies**. Ndebele called this book, published in 1954 about a group of boys on an island going 'native' as 'that most political of political works'.

So, he asked, what became of those who voted for democracy in 1994? This theme is what is being investigated by current

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novels. Writers are taking responsibility for asking uncomfortable questions in the new literature after The Struggle, to expose wrongdoings like the non-delivery of handbooks in Limpopo. Because this is about heralding our future – what impact will this incident have in 20 years?

Krog said that as far as she is concerned, every book makes political statements. She referred to the situation in South Africa by relating an incident of many years ago: prime minister Dr Hendrik Verwoerd attended a rendition of **Die Pluimsaad waai ver**, a play

by Afrikaans poet NP van Wyk Louw, and then mentioned that he disapproved of the content in a political speech he delivered. Now, Krog said, what we would not give to have at least a head of state engaging with art?

Krog said the ANC-in-exile did interact with art, like in the Netherlands, while Struggle supporters like local newspapers, *Mail & Guardian* and *Die Vrye Weekblad* also engaged with art. Thabo Mbeki also showed artistic inclinations with his speech, 'I am an African' – this most quoted speech in our history has artistic rhythm. And now, Krog asked, do our political leaders even have book shelves in their *blingy* homes? Probably not, she surmised: government only wants to hear its own voice.

Alas, Krog lamented, people have lost their connection with literature; the connection they had even at the worst stages of The Struggle. Ndebele agrees in this respect; that expectations of freedom and the opportunity to learn (for a better future) are

dwindling. For this he blamed the government, who are failing the people.

To conclude, one should acknowledge the fact that literature is an art form and as such a form of expression – therefore to be free, we must be able to express ourselves. To express ourselves in literature not only proves this fact, but will ensure that future generations will also be able to do so; this expression means exposure. Exposure to ideas about freedom, for freedom of the future South Africa. The South Africa Nelson Mandela envisaged where there will be no oppression of any kind.

Several members of the audience shared their tales of oppression in other countries, where some of them are from and warned their South African brothers and sisters who love the arts to keep striving for freedom of expression. If there are no politics in literature, there will be no political freedom, eventually.

With these sobering thoughts I left the Fugard Theatre to make my way back to my office in the Foreshore, weaving through masses of street vendors packing up their appliances and merchandise, homeless people begging, shady characters lurking in alleyways, and hundreds of other pedestrians each going their separate ways. Each with their own stories to tell, each of these stories political to some extent; literature in the making.

As for the Festival, if the gravitas of the participants and the quality of the discussions are all on par with the Krog-Ndebele event, I have no doubt that the goals of the facilitators have been met in full, namely: 'to put on a world class international festival that attracts authors from around the world, to promote local authors to an international audience and to build an excitement around books and reading amongst the youth of Cape Town.'

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