

MA (Creative Writing) Mini-thesis Reflective Essay

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An introduction to the portfolio and context of the creative work

Visklippie and other Cape Town stories is a collection of seven short stories, inspired by my experiences of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Cape Town. My writing in this collection grows out of circumstances that I experienced, people that I have met, stories heard, oral history, memory and news events. Margaret Atwood (2002: xx) in discussing motives for writing, determines amongst others, that writing is, “(t)o record the world as it is.” When I started writing this collection, at the outset of the MACW, I had never written short stories before. I was surprised by the stories that wanted to come out, once I paid attention to inner voice and started to pen them. My writing during this time was influenced by the work of several South African authors, some I refer to below. I have inadvertently adopted my writing style from the works read, emulating techniques, tones, rhythms as well as the position of characters and themes in the stories, whilst at the same time, seeking to make my own original contribution. In my writing, I undertake to find as authentic a voice as possible based on a diversity of characters experienced first-hand. Most notable in framing the collection, have been the work of black writers of South African short stories from the mid-twentieth century, as this period encapsulated the volatile years of Apartheid. What I tried to do was write about individual experiences, from a diverse range of voices, men, children and especially female subjectivity.

The stories set in Cape Town, begin with a birth in the 1960s and end with one of a young man, caught up in contentious circumstances, in contemporary times. Two of the seven stories are focalised through marginal male characters. The stories are grounded in local community experience and centre on family relationships where there is triumph over political and personal adversity. As a collection, the stories show complex interior explorations, ironies and paradoxes that reveal fleeting connections and triumphs despite adversity.

Technical and thematic issues in my work and my intentions as a writer

I was born in the mid-1960s, when Apartheid laws had established white privilege and repressed black¹ people. This was an irrevocable part of my life. While I choose not to be subjugated by this heritage, and write from the vantage point of a “coloured” South African, I aim to write about the marginalisation of black people and extreme inequality in our communities then and now. In post-1994 South Africa, I write of the triumphs within black families, connections between people despite racially constructed communities and the paradox that all people experience isolation and adversity regardless of their respective socio-political histories. Examples of this are ‘Waiting’ and ‘The Ladder’.

The short stories experiment with voice. The first two stories ‘Visklippie’ and ‘Tonsillitis’, are narrated in first person, from a child’s view. These stories highlight the racial segregation in her community and allude to violence and inequality within the home. The middle three stories in the collection focus on women’s subjectivity. They are narrated in third and first person. The stories each touch on the overlapping circumstances of women who experience both empowerment and powerlessness, due to their respective circumstances in pre- and post-1994. The last two stories are of individual male voices, both condemned and ostracised within their communities.

The outcome, is that the voices have a tacit connection to each other. An overarching theme is of families, where under the broader context of black exploitation and oppression, such bonds or lack thereof, are significant.

Anderson and Neale (2009:100-103) provide an important grounding for distinguishing characters from the narrator and form. They suggest that choosing to use first person rather than third person voice, is an important decision as it affects story, characters and context. The narrator’s presence in first person may be more direct and engaging of the reader whereas using

¹ I refer to black as representing all population groups other than white under Apartheid Law.

third person allows for an autonomy of the character from the narrator and potentially keeps the reader more in suspense as the story unfolds. My short story collection makes use of varied forms and voices to discern the tone, character through language use. The stories include modes such as stream of consciousness in the narrating (ibid 121-123). My intent is to locate the characters within the text and involve the reader in the dynamic context and events of the narrative.

Why I chose the short story genre

This genre has a special personal appeal. As a new writer of fiction, it provided me with a safety net. I could explore ideas, characters and themes knowing that I would not flounder in sustaining the plot. I could begin a new story while others were in draft. The genre allows me to move from story to story without feeling the responsibility of completing something as arduous as a novel until I am more experienced to do so. These short stories are my first attempt.

Michael Chapman in *The New Century* refers to short story as South Africa's most resilient and innovative literary expression, (ix-xx). As a form that is recognised for its adaptability to circumstances, it has enabled me to experiment and explore my writing ability with lots of flexibility. It captures the inescapable connection and triumph in individual lives despite a range of political, economic and personal hardship. I was able to experiment with voice, plot and character within each story, as well as innovate in the arrangement of narratives within the collection.

I tried to prepare the stories with Michael Vaughan's concepts in mind. In an issue of *Staffrider* (Oliphant, 310-317), he promotes the form as being brief, pithy and immediate. My intention is for the collection to bring out of the shadows the voices that are not generally represented in the mainstream media, on television, film and in the history books.

Professional context for this work / publishing potential

In this section I reflect on the works and era of fiction that has helped me locate my contribution in the short story genre in Cape Town.

I located my project in the context of South African short stories featured in *The Drum Decade* and *Quartet* from the mid-twentieth century that encompassed the volatile years of Apartheid where writer-activists contributed. Missing in that era and what I have worked towards, are a focus on women's lived realities and subjectivities. My stories chip at the deficit created by the largely masculine trend set by the *Drum* writers. The narratives of Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa and Can Temba, for example, while much revered for their contribution, "championed the tsotsi, the jazz man, the penny-whistler, the beauty queen" (Chapman, *The Drum Decade* xi-xii) consequently objectifying women in sexual ways.

In my reading of Cape Town writers, Richard Rive, Alex La Guma and James Matthews, represented in *Quartet*, a slightly different set of concerns emerge though still within a strongly masculine ethos. In this collection, La Guma's stories were about struggles within families during Apartheid and the prison experience. Rive's stories showed the hypocrisy and bigotry that manifest within families. Matthews wrote about the powerlessness and perception of lowliness that dominated people's lives as black men struggled with their own oppression by the Apartheid system. My stories, underscore the conflicts within family relationships and opportunities for reconciliation through existing bonds. Overall, my writing aims to align with Njabulo Ndebele's thinking in his collection of essays, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, where he favours "... individual experience and dealing with actual reality" (31-54).

The influence of other creative writers / fellow students

Unlike some of the better known women writers of the 1980s and 1990s such as Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), I planned for my collection to be of diverse voices in Cape Town. I veered clear of enunciating my stories through coloured cultural identity to be

more representative of black people oppressed under Apartheid. Rayda Jacobs's *The Middle Children* (1994) centred on a woman's memories of Cape Town and exile in Canada, finding a new sense of belonging. My stories highlight personal triumphs against all odds of individual people at home in Cape Town despite political alienation and injustices endured.

The MACW seminars provided direction and suggestions from the facilitators and students. As a person of an older generation, it was exceptionally refreshing to experience the writing of fellow students. We were privileged to have published, celebrated authors such as Meg vandermerwe and Julia Martin, as facilitators. Their subjects and style are useful illustrations of writing technique. The importance of being truthful to the characters and the story, avoiding lies, was emphasised. I consulted authors and academics who speak Xhosa and who are elderly "white" males to authenticate aspects of the stories.

In the poetry module we were only three students and here the creativity and experience of fellow students who are poets, inspired me to read more poetry and think about how the words are laid out on the page. So while this collection is about short stories, my experience of poetry through the MACW taught me to be mindful of how words are strung together in a sentence.

Development of the portfolio: drafting, selection, revision and editing

Each of the stories in the portfolio came about during the MACW. At least one had its origins in a free write that took place during the seminars, namely 'The Ladder'. The rest were written as a result of ideas that stemmed from and took their first shape through free writing sessions I did on my own. My process of drafting has been to first listen to the ideas floating in my mind and begin to think through the possibility of a story. Next, I would hand write and revise. Some suggestions on language usage and cultural norms for example would be integrated, following input from an invited reader.

The first story is about a birth and seemed a good starting point for the collection. The story began to emerge while reading Ali Smith's *Other stories and other stories* (1999) in November 2014. At first I was set on the title and one of the underlying themes, about the parallels between the hole in the Ozone and the child narrator / main character's life. Through the redrafting process with my supervisor, I adjusted the story to be about the narrator's birth leaving out additional themes that had crept in. In the revisions, the title changed to 'Visklippie', a colloquial Afrikaans name for a rockfish. The influence of prescribed and recommended texts read while drafting and revising, has been very empowering.

Part of my challenge in drafting and finalising the stories was keeping the reader orientated to the respective voices in it. I wanted to avoid using "he said and she said" as far as possible to keep the voices sharp and the narrator less controlling.

The first story was particularly painful to write and when reading it out loud during a consultation with my supervisor, I was overcome with emotion. Finding an objective telling of the story was a challenge I faced. As a result several parts were cut since they deliberately detracted from the core of the story. I recognise that there are more stories related to this one that need to be written as a subsequent project.

The second story 'Tonsillitis' started when I asked my colleagues, my peers if they recall seeing red buckets filled with sand, fire extinguishers, on the train stations when they were little. Somehow that theme sprung this story that also got chiselled into shape during the seminars. This story also experiments with the voice of a child narrator in the first person. As the narrator is not named in either story and there is a chronology implied, it could be read as the same child featured in the previous story. In this case, the girl is on a journey by train with her father, to the Red Cross children's hospital for her recurring illness. The child denotes their lives by describing the everyday events, against the backdrop of the seemingly privileged

communities through which the train passes. The child's relationship with the father, who is a source of anxiety and insecurity in the family, is illustrated.

The stories, 'Waiting', 'Delft' as well as 'Anthony's Albatross' and 'The Carpenter' are all imagined from the perspective of 'the other'. This stemmed from the Prose Module, to write the stories seldom told as in the case of a paedophile. The stories 'Waiting' and 'Delft' made me think about what it is to be in the position of these main characters, to live in their circumstances and in so doing, to try and represent their voices. These stories and 'The Ladder' are of women whose life experiences are significantly different to mine and so I tried to internalise it based on what I have witnessed, read about and heard told. In the case of 'Delft' I was not confident enough to write about that community. I used google map to visualise what I had not personally seen in recent years. I consulted with someone who lives in this very high crime area, and listened to the stories told about that context. The setting of 'The Ladder' and parts if it I experienced first-hand. I imagined the events of the main character's life juxtaposed to the life of someone of the same generation but oppressed by the Apartheid legacy. This illustrates the paradox suggested above.

The stories, from the perspective of a male main character, 'Anthony's Albatross' and 'The Carpenter' are also about imagining 'the other'. The first occurred to me while looking in my rear view mirror. An image of a man with a beard triggered this story based again on events witnessed and contrived. For the second, I experienced a burglary and tried to imagine the story from the point of view of the perpetrator through the sheer ordinariness that underpins such abhorrent events. The writing and redrafting process are as described above. Free writing is about pulling on threads as the pen moves across the page and in most cases I could draw on experience, stories heard and told as well as news events.

Historical context choice of creative writing

This collection is a work of fiction that feature stories set in Cape Town that are mainly composed from the oral histories of my extended family members heard while I was growing up. It is substantiated in instances by non-fiction historical works of the period, including online sources. I have integrated themes read in newspapers and reported on the radio. I rely on these kinds of resources to shape my understanding of Apartheid South Africa and post 1994.

Since the concept of trauma is significant to many of the stories, I found Chris van der Merwe, and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *Narrating our Healing* (2007) an important resource. I was guided by their discussion on literary narratives and trauma. They claim that real life issues are disguised in fictional characters and situations (56) and writers can vicariously express what victims find impossible to tell (58) and that there is unity in literature's theme and structure that possess healing potential (60).

Progress as a writer

There are three broad elements that I aimed for as a new writer of short fiction, to write creatively, develop dialogue and characters and apply writing techniques. Such techniques included Natalie Goldberg (1986) and Julia Cameron's "morning pages" (1993), a routine of writing first thing every day, without distraction, by hand, for three pages even when there is apparently nothing to say. It has helped free my energy and facilitated a better flow of prose. I experienced what Anne Lamott says about characters, that the author carries them around, so as to become open to them (1995). I find myself thinking about the characters, when I am not writing and try to measure up whether that is how they would behave or think.

I have yet to master a consistent routine and to write as a habit. I write when thoughts float at me and I quickly snare a line or a page of free writing. I have become more responsive to my inner voice but don't always get to keep the pen moving.

Prior to commencing the MACW, I used writing to reflect and dispense with conflicts. Now, my writing has become creative, imaginative and purposeful towards representing diverse voices. I spend more time feeding the artist, suggested by authors such as Julia Cameron. I now perceive every experience as a source and stimulation for my writing. During the writing of this collection, I enjoyed visual art, observing people, eavesdropping and soaking up what I see, hear, smell, touch and taste.

With the facilitators input, literature referred to and literary stalwarts cited I am beginning to trust my own voice. I am learning to write freely without being hung up on affirmation.

Conclusion

The outcome of my project is a collection of short stories about Cape Town, from the 1960s to contemporary times. Each is a unique story, yet they are part of a whole, the extra-ordinary circumstances that we lived in under Apartheid and now as we transition to democracy. Many writers influenced me and like clanging bells, loosened thoughts that were deeply hidden. I aimed for authenticity of voice, picking up language and colloquialisms along the way. I hope that the collection will make readers smile, nod and turn the page.

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