

RENAISSANCE WOMAN

Helen
Moffett

CECILY VAN GEND

Correspondent

Helen Moffett has an impressive academic record. She has a Ph.D from the University of Cape Town (UCT), where she taught in the English Department for seven years. She has held fellowships at Princeton and Mount Holyoke College in the United States, and has been a Rockefeller Associate at UCT's African Gender Institute, where at present she is an honorary research associate. She has also worked in publishing, and she has ghostwritten, edited, researched and co-authored numerous works in her capacity as a professional editor/writer. All this would have been intimidating, had I not been aware of her interest in popular culture, and heard her speak at public lectures.

She is as far removed as it is possible to be from the conventional image of the ivory-towered academic, detached from the world and engrossed in esoteric preoccupations.

Her appearance provides a clue: she sits at her computer in her office at the African Gender Institute, wearing a lilac shirt and a vivid pink and purple shawl - a cheerful contrast to the mist-swathed mountain outside her window.

Her hair is dark and glossy, her eyes are bright and smiling. She is warm and vibrant, seeming to view the world with benign amusement, as though she is constantly cheered by what she sees. She is passionate about people and reading - and libraries. 'Passionate' is a word she uses a lot. She openly admits to reading what is usually referred to as popular fiction, and is an unashamed watcher of soaps.

Her interest in libraries was engendered early on by her mother, a librarian. While she was still in primary school in the early 70s, history was taught with a decided apartheid slant. Helen's mother, instead of imposing her own views on her children, suggested that they cross-check any facts which they suspected might not be entirely true. 'So, by the age of ten, I was reading **The washing of the spears**. I learnt that if you thought something was a lie, the library was the place to verify it. It became a place for research, a place to find the truth.'

She is passionately (that word again) involved with the Observatory Library, where she helped to establish the Friends of the Observatory Library (FOOLs). Eleven years ago, the library was threatened with closure. At a meeting of concerned supporters, the authorities explained that the reasons were economic - it was simply not viable to keep it open when the circulation figures were significantly lower than those of other libraries.

Helen argued that this was elitist and racist: the library service was using the idea of culture and frequency of reading in the wrong way. 'Why should libraries in more affluent areas remain open simply because the members have higher levels of literacy and more leisure time to read? Libraries should be helping and encouraging poor readers to read more, instead of cutting off their source. Why should the little old lady who comes in once a fortnight to change her *liefdesverhaal* be penalised? Or the nurses borrowing their Mills & Boonses for the long night shifts? Or the pensioners who come in daily to read the newspapers they can no longer afford to buy? What about the blue-overalled workers who came in from the townships to scan the job columns, and the latchkey children who use the library in the afternoons as a place to do their homework?'

The library remained open. It is actively supported by the Friends, who run a volunteer service, manning the library one evening a week so that families can use it after working hours. They also fundraise to supplement the stock and to host community and cultural events. Helen is still very much involved, although she no longer lives in the area. On World Book Day, she gave her Austen/Fielding talk at the Centre for the Book - the entrance charge went to FOOLs.

Libraries, she believes, are not only places for serious research. They are also places for escape and fantasy. People are often embarrassed and ashamed by what they read - they do not like to admit to reading lowbrow fiction. They should not be - there is nothing wrong with reading for escape or for pure pleasure and enjoyment. Libraries fulfil a very real and necessary need for escapism. 'Reading and writing are such important exercises - we should be thrilled that someone is reading at all.'

This conviction has led to her lecture, now quite famous, *Miss Austen meets Ms Jones*. It discusses the connections between Jane Austen's **Pride and prejudice** and **Bridget Jones's diary**, the commercial bestseller in which the author, Helen Fielding, plays with Austen's conventions. 'It shows how low and high art can borrow from each other. Popular fiction can illuminate the classics, make them more accessible to people, instead of being fossils on a shelf. I wanted to show that Jane Austen can be a friend, by providing a little context so that present-day readers can draw parallels with that historical period. I wanted to make Bridget Jones readers realise that there is not a great gulf between popular and highbrow fiction, that a shamelessly commercial, fun romance can borrow from the classics.'

She recalls talking to a group of polite, but initially stony-faced schoolboys about **Pride and prejudice**. After she had got them to confess that they thought of it as 'Mills & Boon in crinolines', she gradually engaged their interest by making

them realise that the issues of relationships and marriage were relevant to their own lives, and that Jane Austen could provide some valuable insights into the female psyche and the way courtship was conducted in other times.

She brings this same approach to her encounters with university students. Although no longer a member of the English Department, she has been teaching an undergraduate English course on South African poetry. 'By the time students get to university, they have often been put off poetry for life at school. I try to introduce them to the wealth and joy of poetry.'

At the recent Grahamstown Festival, she gave her well-known Austen/Fielding lecture, and one entitled *Jane Austen goes to Hollywood (and wins an Oscar)*.

'I was fascinated by the resurgence of interest in Jane Austen in the last years of the twentieth century, particularly in Hollywood. In that most commercially ruthless of communities, they were making big-screen versions of her novels, starring bankable names. Gwyneth Paltrow appeared in **Emma** (with all the personality of boiled hake). There was also a production of **Persuasion**. A version of **Mansfield Park** had a screenplay by Harold Pinter, and was influenced by Edward Said's postcolonial perspective on Jane Austen - that her novels rest on a bedrock of slavery.

Sense and sensibility won an Oscar for Emma Thompson's screenplay, which was a fairly faithful rendering of the novel. 'This was unexpected, especially if you consider that it is a somewhat flawed novel structurally - written at a time when Jane Austen was still wrestling with the novel form. She brought such skill and mastery to this very new literary form, that it is hard to believe that at the time she started writing, it was still developing - compare her works to those of Fielding and Richardson written only slightly earlier. She began by borrowing the epistolary form, as seen in Richardson's novels, and in **Sense and sensibility**, she is still grappling with the remnants of it.'

It was not only Hollywood that was rediscovering Jane Austen: there were also several BBC revivals of her work at this time. Why was there all this fascination with this 'genteel' female writer, portraying the lives of 'a few families in English villages' almost 200 years earlier? What could she possibly have to say to post-modern cinema audiences approaching the end of the second millennium? 'The answer is that there is much more to her works than just boy-meets-girl, romantic fantasies. Yes, they are happily-ever-after, but there's a lot more. They show that relationships can be durable and transformative. And in all the millennium fervour, people wanted to know that things would last. They wanted something they could trust to take with them into the new century.' She adds as an aside: 'It's interesting to note, in this context, that in the year 2000, British readers voted Rudyard Kipling's *If* as the best-loved poem of the twentieth century.'

Reading through Moffett's CV, one realises that her interests go beyond literature and reading. She is an armchair authority on cricket, and was lucky enough to work with well-known film-maker Mark Kaplan on two television documentaries on the subject for Supersport. At present, she is writing a book on 'the art and science of cricket' with Professor Tim Noakes and international coach Bob Woolmer.

'Although I come from a family of cricket fanatics', she says, 'I was not particularly interested in the game until several years ago, when I was very ill and unable to read - which, for me, felt like the end of the world. At the time a triangular series of one-day games was being played between Australia, Pakistan and the West Indies, and I started watching on television. It was a wonderful occupation for someone recuperating - one can doze off momentarily without missing very much! I was soon hooked, and began to realise how fascinating the game was as a cultural and political phenomenon. It is the universal language of the British Empire: wherever you go in the world, whenever you meet people from the sub-continent, Australia or the Caribbean, you immediately have a common language.'

'Then I read CLR James's autobiography, **Beyond a boundary**, in which cricket becomes a metaphor for the struggle for self-determination in the Caribbean: it is a political and post-colonial classic. In South Africa, too, cricket cuts across a great many barriers and boundaries. In *Reverse swing*, the television documentary series which I made with Mark Kaplan, we used the cricket World Cup as a barometer to gauge the state of the nation.'

Her current research interests include issues of rape, sexual violence and their relation to apartheid theories of hierarchy and control, and she has delivered and produced several papers on this subject. This is more than simply a theoretical interest: she conducts workshops for women, and has worked for a number of volunteer organisations, including Lifeline.

At the African Gender Institute, she is involved with editing the writing of high-level academics whose mother-tongue is not English. This arose out of her publishing experience. She

spent four years as academic editor for Oxford University Press in South Africa, where she reworked college-level textbooks so that they would be appropriate for a multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-lingual community. In addition, she has edited the works of a number of well-known and award-winning South African writers, including Zakes Mda and Ivan Vladislavic, and she worked with Elinor Sisulu on her highly praised biography of her parents-in-law: **In our lifetime: the biography of Walter and Albertina Sisulu**.

I walk away from the UCT campus feeling quite breathless, having hardly uttered a word during the interview. She is extremely articulate, witty and entertaining. Examining her CV later, I realise that I have only scratched the surface of this interesting and very unusual woman. Where, I ask myself, does she find the time to pursue all these diverse interests so thoroughly, let alone her academic research? People talk about the Renaissance Man. Perhaps, in this time of the African Renaissance, 'Renaissance Woman' would be the most apt description for Helen Moffett.

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