

# Rediscovering Dora Taylor

Professor SHIRLEY KOSSICK

Correspondent

## A fine but long-neglected writer is rescued from obscurity

Dora Taylor was a prolific author who lived in South Africa from 1926 until 1963. In the words of her daughter, Sheila Belshaw, beneath Taylor's wide-eyed innocent look, the quiet voice, the gentle, shy, reserved manner, lay an irrepressible fiery spirit - a determination to fight with her pen to gain human rights for every person in South Africa. This ever-consuming passion finally led to her exile. 'Oh, how my heart aches to be in Cape Town', she wrote to me in 1964. 'South Africa is where I belong.' But even this isolation did not stop her; and until her death in 1976 she continued to pour every breath of her

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passion into her fight for equality for 'the people', as she called the then non-citizens of our country. Quoting from her diaries, she dedicated all her writing 'To and for the people'.

Unfortunately, however, Dora Taylor's writings have lain forgotten for many years until recently when, through the efforts of her daughter, three volumes of fiction were brought to the attention of Penguin Books. The first of these,

**Kathie**, was published in 2008 by Penguin whose faith in the high quality of the writing was more than vindicated when Dora Taylor (1899-1976) won the 2008 South Africa Literary Posthumous Award.

**Kathie** is a far-ranging and moving novel set in 1950s Cape Town and focused largely on the racial tension which was (and arguably still is) characteristic of South African society. The narrative centres on the life of the eponymous heroine, the oldest of three children in a coloured

family. While **Kathie** develops into a strong, open-minded and sensible woman who realistically accepts her lot in life, Stella, her lighter-skinned sister, falls prey to the ambitious dreams of her grandmother and mother. She grows up dissatisfied, querulous and determined to pass for white. Resentful of Kathie's wise and loving advice, 'Stella hardened herself still more against her sister. Caught on an endless wheel of bitter thoughts, she saw Kathie as the one who, more than anyone else, bound her to the doom of the coloured world'.

Stella's wilful selfishness and her unthinking rejection of her own people lead inevitably to discontent and unhappiness. In contrast to her self-centeredness, Kathie works hard to equip herself with the means to help others. Both characters, and the entire cast of this well-populated novel, are convincingly brought to life. When Kathie falls in love with a black man the varying reactions to this liaison are powerfully conveyed. It is, in fact, mainly through this doomed love affair that the horrors of apartheid are dramatised.

Paul Sipo Mangena, the man Kathie loves, has struggled to acquire his qualifications as a lawyer; but far from bringing him the respect he might have expected, he is regarded by his white peers as an uppity black who has forgotten 'his place'. As he enters more and more into his work of defending his people, the injustice of the laws they neither know nor understand becomes increasingly apparent.





The last section of **Kathie** is the most affecting and striking in its depiction of unworthy power and its abuse. People who misuse others become, in Paul's words, 'less than human ... Their racial hatreds and fears suck their humanity out of them'. But despite such insights and much loss and sorrow in the course of the action, **Kathie** ends on a note of hope and a clarion call for a better future. In the final chapter, significantly titled 'The future is ours', Kathie tells her young companion, 'You are our son, Pieter; you and all the youth who stretch out your hands to life, demanding more and still more, till your manhood shall grow to its full height'.

Though set in pre-democratic South Africa, the novel has not dated at all. Instead it recreates with immediacy the cruelty and narrowness of an unjust and inequitable society through the experience of its well-delineated and vitally believable cast of characters. Like other powerful works of fiction, Taylor's imaginative creation conveys truth probably more forcefully and certainly more movingly than a factual account could ever achieve.

This applies equally to the other two Dora Taylor texts published by Penguin. The title of **Don't tread on my dreams: tales from South Africa** is not, as one might expect, the name of the lead story, but refers to lines from a poem by Yeats. The words could stand as an epigraph for this collection as a whole:

*I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

The appropriateness of the author's adaptation of these lines is borne out in almost all of the present group of eleven stories. Far from treading softly, the perpetrators of South Africa's apartheid laws trod roughshod over the dreams of the country's majority.

In a superb afterword to the stories Dorothy Driver sets the writer and her work in their historical and political context. In only a few highly readable pages she sums up the background to and implementation of the oppressive conditions that characterised the apartheid regime, also euphemistically known as 'separate development'.

During her more than 35 years in Cape Town, Dora Taylor was an active participant in multiracial, politically dissident groups. As she watched the rights of her fellow South Africans being eroded away, she poured her sympathy, disgust and insight into her writing. Her reaction to injustice is manifest in her essays, reviews, novels, poetry, plays and short stories, of which the present selection affords excellent examples.

The themes explored in these stories are often heart-wrenching, which is particularly true of the opening piece, *To tell my story*. Here a retired

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white advocate agrees to defend a black man on charges of attempted rape and murder. As he becomes increasingly aware of his client's innocence, intelligence and humanity he realises that he has formerly not considered that these qualities might occur in a black person. Fair-minded and hoping for justice, the advocate is in fact as helpless as his client in the face of a rigid system preconditioned to favour the evidence of whites over that of blacks.

The second part of the tale is recounted by the accused man, Siyolo, whose voice, as Taylor states in the preface, is 'rather larger than life, perhaps, because he speaks for many voiceless people'. Such voicelessness is dramatised in several of the other stories since. As the prefatory poem laments:

*In the lives of our people is tragic matter to be told  
In dread abundance  
By day and by night.*

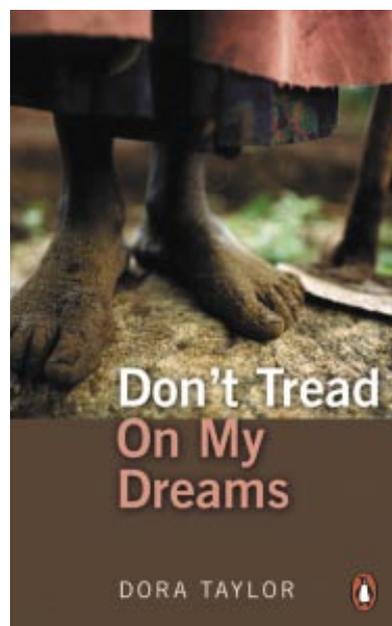
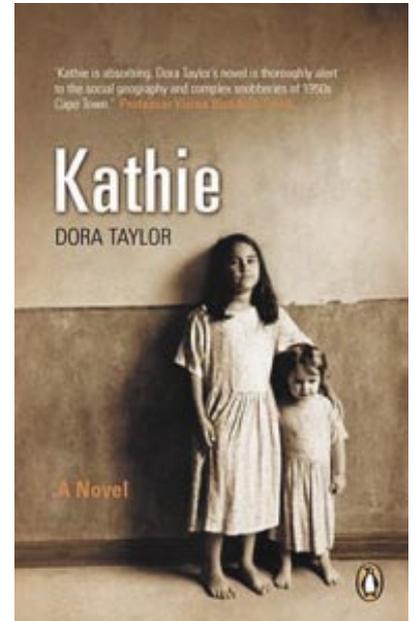
Even when a specific law is new and not yet understood by those affected, no quarter is given. This is the pathetic case of Takane in **The return**. Having worked for years to acquire a few cattle to take home, he arrives to discover that cattle are banned in the area.

Dorothy Driver suggests that 'Taylor's concern at the failures of human



connection extends into a vision of what Europeans can and should learn ... from some Africans about what it is to be human'. She goes on to single out *The Christmas Tree* as 'what may well be the most powerful story of this collection'. Here and in *Nonibe* Taylor 'presents contrasting black and white perspectives'. As a result the stories 'make interesting claims about conflicting points of view and limitation of perspective'.

In the case of *Nonibe* the eponymous young





black woman has to endure a variety of cruelties from an unthinking white family who regard her as belonging to a lesser species. She is not really human, in other words, even when she becomes the object of her employer's lust.

While the overall tenor of these stories is sad and often tragic, there

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are many moments of ironic wit and humour. Gumede in *The pig's bladder*, for instance, is a semi-comic figure in his smug, egocentric way. He fails to recognise that his power - built on betrayal, deception and self-interest - is about to disappear, rendering him a prime target for ridicule.

These accomplished stories repeatedly remind us of past inequities that many would prefer to forget.

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In the novel **Rage of life** Dora Taylor again exhibits her uncanny ability to enter into the lives of her characters while simultaneously communicating her disgust with the appalling precepts of the apartheid regime.

**Rage of Life** centres on the story of Linda Malindi, born and bred in Sophiatown. Orphaned and homeless at 16, she must learn to fend for herself. With a vividness hard to match Taylor describes the grasping, pitiless world of 'that urban township, that seething pot of humanity, that compost heap flung outside the city confines, and left to stew with the hot stinking manure of poverty and vice, violent, full of death, yet heaving with the ferment of an irrepressible vitality'.

As Linda struggles to survive in this hostile environment her story becomes emblematic of apartheid's deprivations in general. Like those around her, Linda has only a rudimentary education and knows nothing of the traditions or moral values of her forebears. She snatches what joy she can from life and becomes a habitu  of Angels One, a throbbing shebeen run by the formidable yet intrinsically humane Ma-Jaze.



*In Zambia with Sheila, 1962*



Here, under Ma-Jaze's all-seeing eye, the 'rage of life' itself takes place as the patrons play out their rivalries, greed, violence and desperate need for pleasure and escape. This mixed troupe has one important thing in common, which is their contempt for the law of the white man. As Taylor so wisely shows, the injustices of apartheid can lead only to moral degradation whose effects are still with us today.

Where there had been one vast social dishonesty, one huge theft, of which he [the black man] was the victim, individual dishonesty seemed the sanest response. Since the laws had outlawed him from society, he answered in kind with his own brand of lawlessness.

When Simon Manzana leaves his parched homeland to find work in the city the contrast between traditional mores and the moral vacuum of Sophiatown is powerfully dramatised in his love affair with Linda. While he is torn between his newfound passion and loyalty to the family he has left behind, Linda regards his scruples and sense of duty with utter incomprehension and disdain.

Simon's journey back to his village starkly reveals another destructive aspect of apartheid. He travels through an 'ashen' landscape, denuded of vegetation - and symbolically of hope - to find his family pitifully diminished. Land and cattle have been taken from them by what his father calls 'wolves' who 'devour' the peasantry's livelihood.

Throughout this novel one is kept constantly aware of the intrusive, not to say lethal, pressure brought to bear on all the characters by an unfair and inhumane system. Whether in the country or in town, whether in the choice of occupation or in private life, in fact in every aspect of existence from birth to death the apartheid laws impinged and controlled. That Taylor was able to integrate this truth into fast-moving and absorbing works of literature is a fine achievement indeed.

