

Sharing our stories



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I have been asked to share with you one of the most remarkable stories of the past decade: South Africa's relatively peaceful transition to democracy. During this week we hope to share with you our children's books. South Africa has three great contributions to make to the world: children's literature: the folktales of its peoples; books about its magnificent animals, plant kingdoms and landscapes; and stories which document, grieve over, and celebrate our history. Children's literature has been produced in every period of South African history. Perhaps visitors found at least something that resonates with their own countries' experiences: the oral literature of pre-colonial Africa, followed by the literature of colonialism, colonial wars, and neo-colonialism; civil wars; the repressions of a harsh regime; revolution, emergence from colonialism, and the building of a new democracy for the twenty-first century.

There must have been something special about the mix of humans, animals and physical setting in this country that ensured that the very first written children's literature that was set in this country tackled four great rights: human rights, children's rights, animal rights, and freedom from religious persecution. Sadly, this early flowering of liberal writing was followed by a century or more of mostly undistinguished children's literature that never touched on these issues.

The first children's poem set in South Africa was written in 1820 by an Englishman, Isaac Taylor, in which he deplored

the hunting of ostriches for slaughter and captivity in zoos. The ostrich hen says to her mate,

I sadly fear

'These are some wild-beast men I hear...

When they kill us, all they want

Are feathers, from our back so scant.

The next South African children's poem was a satire, written in this country by an immigrant Scottish lawyer, Thomas Pringle, in 1834, which fiercely criticised the British and the Cape Dutch for massacring indigenous people and plundering their villages:

Dutch and British in a band

Are come to rifle Cafferland...

Young and old in death are lying,

And the harried swarm are flying...

And, to hallow this day's work,

They'll tithe the spoil to build a kirk.

One of the first novels to be set in this country was a children's novel, **The English boy** at the Cape, written by an Englishman, Edward Kendall, and published in 1835. It makes a graphic plea for religious and racial tolerance. A little English boy, Charles, becomes a street child in Cape Town, the first in South African children's literature. I will be returning to street children when I look at some modern books later.

Charles is taken in by a Muslim family, who teach him cleanliness, godliness, schooling and industry. A shocking episode occurs when a gang of drunken British midshipmen break up a Muslim festival, accusing the participants of devil-worship. Even Charles is injured in the brawl. People of all colours, except the English and Dutch, tend the injured, and Charles is cared for by 'the Jew Benjamin'. At other points in the long story, he is also cared for by various indigenous people. Children's rights in the Cape became a subject of scandal at the time this book was published.

A feature of South African literature is how often children have shared their stories in print; and later I will be quoting words penned by some of our modern young people. Here I want to honour the memory of courageous boys and girls all those years ago who wrote letters that had an impact across the British empire. In those days, Britain exported thousands of unwanted children as child labour to its colonies. In the 1830s some were sent to the Cape by the

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Children's Friend Society. Some of these teenagers were not only literate but determined enough to pay postage out of their meagre wages to write letters home detailing the conditions under which they were kept. While some had no complaint, others reported that they were treated badly. Their families, in turn, passed the letters on to the newspapers, where they were published. They created such a storm that the colonial secretary ordered an investigation, as a result of which no more children were sent here, while Canada and Australia continued to receive them right up to the middle of the twentieth century.

After this illustrious start, our children's literature did not raise questions of rights again until the 1960s. No black children's writers emerged, and much of what the whites wrote reflected their complacent lives of racial privilege. But what did emerge was a genre of books that in sheer quantity sets this country apart from other Commonwealth countries as an example of sharing its literature. The books are translations of indigenous folktales into Afrikaans and English for young white readers. White children learned the language of their nannies and absorbed their folktales. If they were not so fortunate, their parents wanted them to hear or read indigenous stories collected in books.

Dorothea Bleek, who later published one of the most important collections of Bushman tales, heard them first as a child in 1878 from men who had been imprisoned for sheep stealing when white farmers occupied their hunting grounds. They were held in the Cape Town Breakwater Prison, now the Breakwater Lodge Hotel. Her father took them to his home, where he and his sister-in-law transcribed 10 000 pages of their lore. A friend of mine has written a book in which he describes Dorothea's experience: /Han=kasso was gentle and kindly. The colonial children gave him much pleasure, and he played with them and made them birthday presents, such as a set of diminutive bows and arrows or a !goin!goin, a bullroarer that /Xam people used as an instrument to make the bees swarm. The children loved to hear him tell his stories. They could not understand the /Xam language, so a member of the Bleek family gave them an outline before the performance began. Then, enthralled, they watched his 'eloquent gestures', feeling rather than knowing what was happening. Today the /Xam people and their language are extinct, but thanks to the Bleek family and their /Xam teachers, their stories live on to inspire new generations.

Well over 150 volumes of South African folktales have been published for children. They have also inspired superb new writing by white authors. In 1974, for example, the Afrikaans writer/illustrator Pieter Grobbelaar explained that he was moved to write the story **The white arrow** when he read the words of /Kabbo, one of those exiles at the Breakwater, who told Bleek: 'Thou knowest that I sit waiting for the moon to turn back for me, that I may return to my place. That I may listen to all the people's stories, when I visit them. That I may sit in the sun, that I may, sitting, listen to the stories which yonder come, which are stories which come from a distance like the wind that floats from afar, and we feel it.'

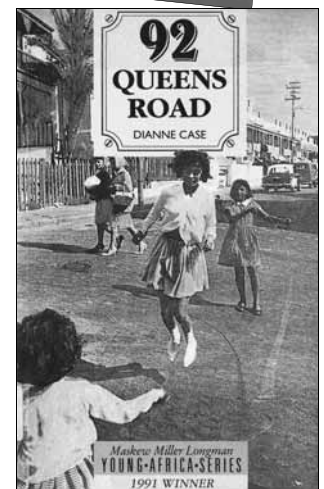
In the last few years, black writers have contributed their own books of the tales which they learned as children and want to pass on to new generations of all races because oral

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traditions are dying out. Nombulelo Makhuphula introduced her collection, **Xhosa fireside tales**: I remember my grandmother, Nokulila, as a good and kindhearted woman. I remember her, most of all, as a unique story-teller. The stories she told us as children, years ago, are still imprinted in my memory. I, as a mother, have always felt the need to pass these stories on, not only by word of mouth as the tradition was then, but also through my pen. For most of the twentieth century, very few black people wrote children's books either in their own languages, or in English or Afrikaans. Consequently, young readers did not have many opportunities to read books giving the authentic voice of black people. But whites did write lots of books featuring black children. Postcolonial critics may reject them because the African viewpoint is interpreted by whites; but, in the absence of black writers, some of them have an honourable place in our literary history because of their sympathetic efforts to introduce white readers to black experience.

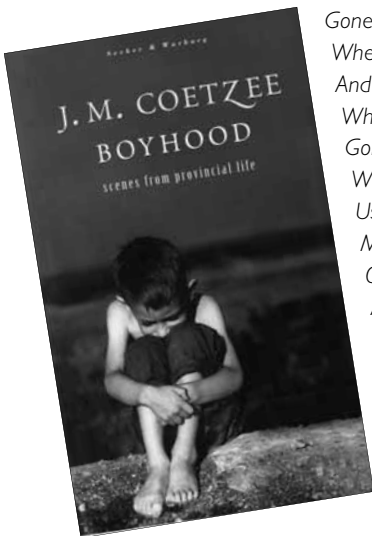
In spite of the dearth of children's books by black writers, for anyone wanting to read about the experiences of young children of all races under apartheid, South Africa has a wealth of fine works of semi-fiction and autobiography, intended mainly for adult readers, ranging from the classic **Down Second Avenue**, written in 1959 by the doyen of South African literary figures, Es'kia Mphahlele (who was present at the opening ceremony), to **Boyhood**, by our recent winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, JM Coetzee. Visitors looking for the Cape Town experience should keep their eyes open for books by Dianne Case, who writes for children from her own experience about growing up in Cape Town's disadvantaged communities. Her book **92 Queens Road** won our top award for children's books in English, the Percy FitzPatrick Prize of the English Academy of Southern Africa, in 1992.

On 16 June 1976 school students of Soweto rose up against the government, insisting on their right to choose in what languages they would learn. From that fateful day the voices of young South Africans could never be ignored again. The effect



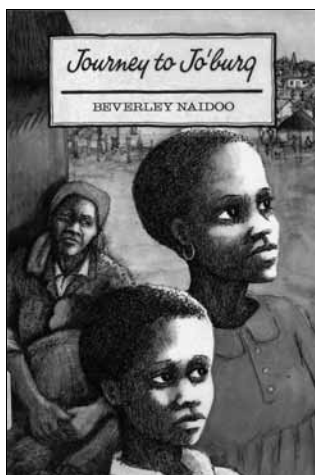
'We must love white people and they should also like us in order to build a very strong nation'

on children's and young adult literature was almost immediate. Writers found it possible to write novels about young people coming to grips with the great socio-political issues of apartheid. Some novels, including **Journey to Jo'burg** by Beverley Naidoo, were banned, but writers persisted, and in their works one can follow the experiences of young people of all races, from the darkest days, through the uncertainties of transition, to the social comedy of coming to terms with living in a breathtakingly modern democracy. From the 1960s onwards, but particularly since the 1980s, young voices were also liberated by the publication of writing by young people in magazines, annuals and little books. In the darkest days of apartheid, a black girl, Martha Semake, writes a poem about sharing her story:
Gone are those days



*Gone are those days
When my grandfather used to sit me on his lap
And tell me about his youth
When he was a good herdsman.
Gone are those days
When my grandmother
Used to cook inside a smokey hut
Made of mud and roofed with grass.
Oh! What am I to tell my grandchildren one day?
About my happy days watching TV?
Or my fear of soldiers and police roaming the township?
A white man shouting in his highest voice
"Shoot! Skiet! Shoot those kaffirs!
Shoot those klipgooiers!
Is this what we call life?
Are we to hide or stay indoors
For the rest of our youth days?*

At the height of apartheid, we see young people yearning to reach across the divide which adults created. A white teenager writes a story in which she and her black childhood playmate meet again awkwardly as young adults: 'We dared not share our innocence of childhood into our grown years.' A thirteen-year-old black child writes in 1986, 'We must love white people and they should also like us in order to build a very strong nation.' Who would have thought that in 2001 another black child of the same age would be able to write, in the collection, **Letters to Madiba**, 'I'm proud to be a South African child because people of South Africa like working as a nation'.



Last year the Centre for the Book in Cape Town published a collection of youth writing called **In my life**. A girl writes, 'I'd love to write something that the President would quote some day and say, "I want to end my speech with these words from Cynthia Riwida, a famous writer".' You can't aim much higher than sharing your words with the President, but in the new South Africa, anything is possible.

I do not wish to pretend that all is well for the youth of this country in 2004. Possibly the most famous words written by a child under apartheid were those of eight-year-old Moagi in 1986: 'When I am old I would like to have a wife and two children, a boy and a girl, and a big house and two dogs and freedom.' We can compare these words with those of a young offender, in a collection of writing by an incarcerated youth published in Cape Town last year, who is anxious to share his story so that others may learn from it: 'Do you know if you lock a dog in a kennel for a month or two and you let him out, did you see how he jumps about? He runs around because he knows he is free. I'll give you some advice... Make the best of your freedom. God gave you freedom, don't let the judge take it away.' Children at risk are a subject of great concern to our writers. A lot of our children's and young adult fiction portray the lives of the street children of Cape Town and Johannesburg, in serious but also in lighter vein, such as in the series *The street detectives*, about a group of boys who live in a shelter and have exciting adventures. What has happened to South African youth literature is, in the words of the literary scholar Jakes Gerwel, former director-general in the office of President Mandela, 'the emancipation of the personal from the overbearing domination of the political'. This has opened up the opportunity to explore the personal lives of children. One thinks of the innocent ups and downs of Niki Daly's internationally popular little girl, Jamela. But this emancipation has also obliged us to engage with global issues. Our books, that have long celebrated the environment and explored the need for conservation, have come into their own because of the world environmental movement.

South Africa has some of the world's oldest national parks, dating back to the nineteenth century. For many years in the twentieth century, children's stories featured the animals of these parks and the adventures of the game rangers. This is understandable, because we are fortunate to have the so-called flagship species that are the admiration of tourists - the so-called Big Five - elephant, lion, rhinoceros, buffalo and leopard. But gradually, picture books and youth fiction spread the message of ecological concerns wider, to include the conservation of wetlands, rivers, plants, birds, insects and marine creatures such as whales. (Our coasts offer some of the best land-based whale watching in the world.) We have excellent non-fiction for children on these topics, which you might like to keep an eye out for. In addition, as a country that has found a new identity, we are becoming aware of our responsibilities to the rest of Africa and, indeed, the whole world.

The most recent winner of the Percy FitzPatrick Prize for English-language children's books was a novel set in Cape Town by Patricia Pinnock called **Skyline**, which looks at the consequences of the advent of democracy here in 1994 and the global obligations it has imposed on us. She counters the

xenophobia felt towards refugees from elsewhere in Africa by celebrating the richness of their contribution to their host country. This is her description of their stories, which fill the apartment block in Long Street where they gather: 'Their words cry through the stairwell like egrets flying home. Their music makes each flat become a village with bellowing oxen coming home at night. Their drumming speaks in the ochre and mud of clay pots and baskets woven tightly to hold beer and sour milk. A tin guitar twangs forlornly about a crowded shack in a Lusaka township; a small drum, plaited round its edge with twine and carried across borders, down footpaths and along highways, pounds out songs of migrations and moving nomads, about orange sands and shifting sheets of dunes peppered with the bones of lost travellers.'

At last, South Africa has claimed its heritage as being part of Africa. And I, too, welcome all of you who are visitors. We are enriched by your coming, and we hope you will want to take our stories home with you.

Elwyn Jenkins is professor emeritus of English at Unisa. This is an edited version of the keynote address delivered at the congress of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) held in Cape Town in September 2004.

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