

Zoë Wicomb | 23 November 1948 to 13 October 2025

A tribute from Amazwi South African Museum of Literature



Wicomb at Amazwi in 2020

Zoë Wicomb was born in Vanrhynsdorp and grew up in Namaqualand. She studied at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), then went to England in the 1970s to continue her studies at Reading University. She also worked in Nottingham and Glasgow for some time. In the UK, she was active in the anti-apartheid movement and embarked on a literary career, founding and editing the London-based *Southern African Review of Books* and writing short stories. She returned to South Africa in 1990 to teach at UWC, but returned to Scotland in 1994, where she became a professor of creative writing at the University of Strathclyde until her retirement in 2009. She was a visiting Professor Extraordinaire attached to the University of Stellenbosch from 2005 to 2011. She has written critical articles focusing on feminism and postcolonial literature and a collection of essays in addition to her fiction, which in turn has received much critical attention in the literary world.

Wicomb's debut work, a semi-autobiographical collection of connected short stories, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), looks at the experiences of coloured people searching for identity amidst discrimination and racial ambiguity. Her later work widens her scope to look at the persistent influence of race and gender on people's lives in post-apartheid South Africa and include another collection of short stories: *The One that Got Away* (2008), and novels *David's Story* (2001), *Playing in the Light* (2006), *October* (2014). Her last novel, *Still Life* (2020), is a metafictional work bringing together themes from her work: it features a time-travelling character from someone else's book, a writer tasked with the biography of Thomas Pringle, Scottish-born abolitionist, publisher and in some contexts regarded as father of South African poetry, and other ghosts haunting the present.

In February 2020 Wicomb visited Amazwi for the opening of an exhibition on J.M. Coetzee. Part of the programme was a day of discussions and reading by South African authors. Wicomb read extracts from *Still Life*, giving the audience a sneak peak of the soon to be published work.

In 2013 Wicomb received the inaugural Windham-Campbell prize for her fiction from Yale University. This is what the judges said about her work: "Zoë Wicomb's subtle, lively language and beautifully crafted narratives explore the complex entanglements of home, and the continuing challenges of being in the world." Other awards and nominations included: 2001 M-Net Book Prize for *David's Story*, 2007 Shortlist for the Commonwealth Writers Prize (African region) for *Playing in the Light*, 2009 Shortlist for The Commonwealth Writers prize (African region) for *The One that Got Away* and 2009 Shortlist for M-Net Literary Award for *The One that Got Away*.

Zoë Wicomb will be missed but leaves a legacy of highly praised and important literary works.

