



Women's Month 2026

Amazwi's celebration of South African women authors.

*The pulse of
South African stories*





One of Amazwi's responsibilities is to promote our nation's literary heritage, and our writers. It was not easy to choose 31 from among the many South African women authors, and we made some difficult decisions. The writers featured here represent a cross-section of experience, youth, genre, and renown. The intention is to offer some inspiration from some of those who have reached the goal they share with many other South African women: becoming a writer.

We hope that the authors in this exhibition will inspire you to pick up your pen or take to the keyboard, and write the stories that live within you.



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NADINE GORDIMER

“I began to write out of a sense of wonder about life, a tremendously vivid response to being alive.”

Nadine Gordimer (1923–2014) was a celebrated South African writer and political activist best known for her powerful novels and short stories that explore apartheid, racial injustice and human rights. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991. The Prize is awarded for a body of work, and Gordimer's most important novels include *The Conservationist* (1974), *Burger's Daughter* (1979), and *July's People* (1981). Gordimer began writing at the age of nine and published her first short story at fifteen. Her writing exposed the brutal realities and institutionalized racism of the apartheid regime to an international audience, and the apartheid government targeted her through literary censorship and the banning of her major anti-apartheid novels.



SINDIWE MAGONA

“My great hope for African women is that one day they will come into their own. That is why I chose to write.”

Sindiwe Magona is one of South Africa's most beloved storytellers and writers. With keen wit and penetrating insight into the complex web of challenges that are faced by the people of South Africa, her writing is both deep and accessible. She gives hope for the future by shining light on the causes of difficult issues and revealing pathways towards change. Her most important works include *To My Children's Children* (1990), *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1991), *Mother to Mother* (1998), *Beauty's Gift* (2008) and *When the Village Sleeps* (2021).

Photograph by Simone Scholtz, courtesy of Kwela Books.



DALENE MATTHEE

“The Knysna Forest is a living entity which we must respect and preserve.”

Born in Riversdale in the Western Cape, Dalene Matthee is an Afrikaans-speaking writer. Her famous forest novels were translated into English. *Kringe in 'n Bos* (1984, translated into *Circles in a Forest*) and *Fiel se Kind* (1985, translated into *Fiel's Child* in 1986) capture the heart of the Knysna forest and explore themes of the human connection to nature. They also give deep insight into the social history of the region.

Translated into more than 14 languages, her stories touch readers across the globe. Her memory lives on through her books and the Dalene Matthee Big Tree in the heart of Knysna.

Photograph from www.dalenematthee.co.za.
Visit the site for more insight into Matthee's life and work.



Scan to visit
Dalene Matthee's
website



BESSIE HEAD

“I was born ... in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital. ... My mother was white, and she had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant.”

Born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, Bessie Head faced profound hardships early in life under apartheid laws. In 1964 she moved to Serowe, Botswana, where she produced her greatest literary works. Through groundbreaking novels like *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power* (1973), Head became a pioneering voice in African feminist and post-colonial literature. Her writing continues to be celebrated globally for its deeply personal examination of displacement, prejudice, resilience, and human dignity.

Photograph from Amazwi's David Phillip Collection, and shows Bessie Head at her typewriter in her home in Francistown, Botswana.



FAITH NGANDI

“Ndinelizwi elincinci elihleli lindikhumbuza ukuba mandidlale indima yam ekuphuculeni ilizwe lethu ukuze abantwana bethu nesizukulwana sethu sibe nako ukuphila ubomi obububo.”

Faith Mtyida-Ngandi is an author of two isiXhosa poetry collections, *Ibhekile* (2021), followed by *Umthubi*. Amazwi hosted the launch of *Ibhekile*, and despite the Covid pandemic subsiding, each copy of the book came with a mask, with the title of the book inscribed on it. Dressed in full traditional attire, Ngandi dedicated this book, which inspires a sense of pride in one's mother tongue, to all her teachers from primary school to secondary. *Ibhekile* includes such poems as 'Ubizo' and 'Madoda Kwanele' that touch on nature as well as gender-based violence. 'Izandla' is dedicated to her son, who was involved in a car accident and afterwards could not care for himself.

Photograph taken at Amazwi, at the launch of *Ibhekile*,

18 September 2021.



DIANE AWERBUCK

“I’ve researched and written lots of things. ... Somehow none of that is terribly useful at four in the afternoon. The tears before bedtime are usually mine.”

Diane Awerbuck (b. 1974) is a writer, teacher, editor and reviewer whose work has been translated into German, Swedish, Mandarin and Russian. Her first novel, *Gardening at Night*, won the 2004 Commonwealth Best First Book (Africa and the Caribbean) prize and was shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award. Her second novel, *Home Remedies* (2012), reflects on themes of the past interweaving into the present, and care for the environment. Her doctorate deals with how people write about trauma, and echoes of this are found in the novel’s presentation of motherhood and the experience of violence.

Photograph from the website of the Open Book Festival.



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GLADYS THOMAS

“I write for all the courageous men, women, youth and children of all the townships in South Africa, for their perseverance in our long struggle for basic human rights and dignity.”

Gladys Thomas (1934-2022) was a South African poet, short-story writer and playwright. Born and raised in Cape Town, her family was forcibly relocated from Simonstown under the Group Areas Act. Her writing highlighted the harsh conditions to which coloured people, particularly women and children, were subjected under apartheid. Highly regarded in literary and dramatic circles both in South Africa and abroad, Thomas was named as a Patron of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) when it was formed in 1992. In 2007 she was awarded the National Order of Ikhamanga in Silver, and a Lifetime Achievement Award by the South African Literary Awards.



PHILLIPPA YAA DE VILLIERS

“Because I wasn't told that I was adopted until I was twenty, I lacked a vocabulary to describe who I am and where I come from, so performing and writing became ways to make myself up.”

Born in Hillbrow in 1966, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers is a poet, scriptwriter and performer. Her autobiographical one-woman show *Original Skin* explores her identity as the daughter of an Australian mother and a Ghanaian father who was adopted and raised by a white family in apartheid South Africa. The Centre for the Book published her first collection of poetry, *Taller than Buildings* (2010). *The Everyday Wife* (2010) won the 2011 South African Literary Award for Poetry. She has written for theatre and television, and in 2009 she won the National Arts Festival's Writing Beyond the Fringe prize for *The day that Jesus dropped the ball ... and other stories*.

The photo shows her reading at the Berlin Poetry Festival in 2009.



MIRIAM TLALI

“I did think I would become something. I wanted to become somebody, somehow. But the idea of becoming a so-called freedom fighter came much later when I realised the world I was living in.”

Tlali was the first Black woman in South Africa to publish a novel in English. *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975) draws directly from her own life working in a Johannesburg furniture shop. She exposes the daily humiliations, economic inequality, and racial absurdities of apartheid. It was censored by the apartheid regime, as was her 1980 novel *Amandla*. Tlali co-founded *Staffrider* magazine in 1978 to give anti-apartheid writers a voice, and focused on black, female voices at a time when literature was dominated by male voices. She paved the way for generations of African woman writers, and for this she was awarded the Order of Ikhamnga in Silver in 2008.



MYESHA JENKINS

“We want to claim a stage where women who are poets can speak to and move other men and women. We’re tired of ‘and now the ladies are gonna come up,’ as though we are different to other poets”

Myesha Jenkins (1948-2020) was a poet and spoken word performer. Her collections include *Breaking the Surface* (2005), *Dreams of Flight* (2011), and *To Breathe Into Another Voice* (2017) which reflects on the experience of jazz in poets’ lives. Jenkins was a founding member of the Feelah Sistah Spoken Word Collective. In 2013 she won the Mbokodo Award for Women in the Arts in the Poetry category. A politically conscious, jazz-loving artist known for her feminist outlook, her writing style is open and descriptive, and sometimes challenging. Amazwi holds the Myesha Jenkins collection.

Photograph: Feelah Sistah Spoken Word Collective, from left to right: Myesha Jenkins, Napo Masheane, Ntsioki Mazwai and Lebo Mashile. Photographer: Gail Smith



ELLEN KUZWAYO

“Nothing in life is so hard that you can't make it easier by the way you take it.”

An influential South African activist, community leader, and author who dedicated her life to social justice, women's rights, and the struggle for democracy, Kuzwayo was affectionately known as 'Ma K' or the 'Mother of Soweto'. Her groundbreaking autobiography *Call Me Woman* (1985) explores the experiences of Black women in South Africa and was the first book by a Black writer to be awarded the CNA Literary Award. *Sit Down and Listen* (1990) is a collection of short stories, followed in 1998 by *African Wisdom: A Personal Collection of Setswana Proverbs*. Following South Africa's transition to democracy, Kuzwayo served as a Member of Parliament.



INGRID JONKER

“I know there are other things in life apart from love, but one has to have a basis to go out from. Without it, my whole wretched past lifts its dreadful head, and looks at me”

Ingrid Jonker (1933–1965) was an iconic South African poet whose intensely personal and lyrical anti-establishment verse became a symbol of resistance and human dignity. A key figure in the ‘Sestigers’ movement of Afrikaans writers, her work defied the apartheid regime and earned her lasting global acclaim. Jonker’s legacy was underscored in 1994 when President Nelson Mandela read ‘Die kind wat doodgeskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga’ in full during his inaugural address to South Africa’s first democratic Parliament, calling her a poet who ‘was both an African and a South African’.

The portrait of Jonker is installed on Amazwi's balcony exhibition space, and is part of a temporary exhibition of portraits drawn from a collection donated to the museum by the National Arts Festival.



LAURETTA NGCOBO

“There was no home. I had no home. That was the highest point of my painful exile”

Born at Ixopo in KwaZulu-Natal, Ngcobo (1931-2015), Ngcobo was a political and gender activist, and one of the speakers at the Women's March in 1956. In 1963 she left South Africa for exile, and taught in the United Kingdom for 25 years. She returned to South Africa in 1994, where she taught until she was made a Member of the Provincial Legislature. In 2006, Ngcobo received the Lifetime Achievement Award of the South African Literary Awards, and in 2008 she was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver.

Ngcobo is best known for her two novels, *Cross of Gold* (1981) and *And They Didn't Die* (1990), in which she explores the plight of black women living under the oppression of apartheid.

The photograph shows Ngcobo during a visit to Amazwi in 2014.



ANTJIE KROG

“One wants to be a changed person at the end of the text, even in the minutest way, but something must have happened inside one among those words, something that makes one see life more intensely, more profoundly, differently.”

Antjie Krog is one of South Africa's most influential poets, journalists, and academics. Writing primarily in Afrikaans, she has translated much of her own work into English. She is celebrated for her fierce honesty, her intense lyricism, and her profound engagement with identity, social justice, and themes of reconciliation. Her powerful voice continues to shape Southern African literature, earning her numerous national and international literary honours, including the Alan Paton Award for *Country of My Skull* and the Stockholm Award for Peace and Culture, awarded by the Hiroshima Foundation in recognition of her work reporting on the TRC and in promoting reconciliation through literature.

The photo of Krog can be found on Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antjie_Krog.

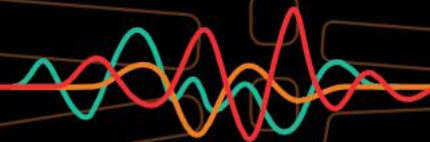


FATIMA MEER

“Regardless of how many years we have spent in this life, we must get up and shout.”

Fatima Meer (1928–2010) was a human rights activist, sociologist, and author. As a founder of the Institute of Black Research (IBR) and a leading anti-apartheid voice, her writing blended academic rigor with passionate political and social critique. Meer’s life was defined by a continuous refusal to stay silent. Beginning her activism at just 16 years old, she went on to become a founding member of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW). She faced multiple banning orders, survived an assassination attempt, and endured months of imprisonment. Throughout it all, she channelled her experiences into more than 40 books, including *Higher than Hope*, the first authorized biography of Nelson Mandela.

The photograph is from Wikipedia:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fatima_Meer.jpeg



ZOË WICOMB

“I find writing so very difficult, so dispiriting for much of the time, that I can’t help thinking that there must be a category of ‘real’ writers who find it less of a struggle.”

Zoë Wicomb was a celebrated South African novelist, short-story writer, and academic. Her writing is acclaimed for its intellect, subtle humour, and nuanced exploration of identity, race, gender, and memory. In 1970 Wicomb left South Africa to escape the apartheid regime and taught at the University of Strathclyde as a professor of post-colonial literature and creative writing. Living in exile provided her with the critical distance to explore the shared historical connections, displacement, and movement between Scotland and South Africa. She maintained strong ties to South Africa, serving as a Professor Extraordinaire at Stellenbosch University from 2005 to 2011 and making regular visits back to the country.

Photo from the website of the Commonwealth Foundation:
<https://shorturl.at/fK6kl>



MAKHOSAZANA XABA

“We must write as much as possible for future generations to understand. How else can I explain to my child why we couldn't use the same toilets as white people, and answer her when she asks how could we allow that to happen?”

Makhosazana Xaba (b. 1957) is an award-winning poet, short story writer, essayist, editor and translator, widely recognised for her contribution to literature, feminist thought and cultural activism. She has trained as a midwife and psychiatric nurse and has worked with national and international NGOs and media organisations in the areas of women's rights, gender and anti-bias training and violence against LGBT communities. Xaba went into exile during the second state of emergency in 1986, returning to South Africa in 1990 with the ANC Women's League. Her poetry, fiction and academic work reflect this lifetime of active involvement with politics.

The photo shows Xaba signing books at a launch at Amazwi in 2019.



GABEBA BADEROON

“As a poet, I try to be equal to the depth and darkness and beauty of the world in which we live.”

Gabeba Baderoon (b.1969) is a poet and academic specialising in women's, gender and sexuality studies, African studies and comparative literature. Her poetry explores the intimate intersections of memory, identity, belonging and justice. Her debut collection, *The Dream in the Next Body*, won the 2005 Daimler-Chrysler Arts Award for Poetry and her second book, *A Hundred Silences*, was shortlisted for both the Olive Schreiner and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) prizes in 2007. Her 2018 collection *The History of Intimacy* won the Elisabeth Eybers and UJ Prizes as well as a National Institute for the Humanities & Social Sciences (NIHSS) award. Many fellowships, scholarships and residencies attest to her contribution to global conversations on race, gender, religion and belonging. Her work has consistently foregrounded marginalised voices and illuminates the ways personal histories are shaped by broader social forces, including colonialism, apartheid, migration and faith.

The image is from the website of Pen South Africa.



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PUMLA DINEO GQOLA

“Writing discovered me. It continues to be at the centre of my life. It is where I love myself better.”

A leading voice in African feminist literature and postcolonial studies, Prof. Pumla Dineo Gqola holds the SARChI Chair in African Feminist Imaginations at Nelson Mandela University. Throughout her career, her fearless writing and scholarship have continually challenged patriarchy, re-examined history, and redefined gender discourse across the continent. In 2015 she published the groundbreaking work *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, which earned the prestigious 2016 Alan Paton Award for non-fiction. *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist* (2017) is a collection of personal-political essays. In 2021 she published *Miriam Tlali: Writing Freedom*, as well as *Female Fear Factory: Gender and Patriarchy Under Racial Capitalism*, which won the 2022 National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences Award for Best Non-Fiction Monograph.

The image is from the website of the Open Book Festival.



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KAREN JENNINGS

“I believe that stories matter because they are how we make sense of the world... they give us a means of translating our lived experiences, which contributes to how we engage with one another and how we see our own place in the world.”

Karen Jennings was born in Cape Town in 1982. Finding Soutbek, Jennings' debut novel, was shortlisted for the inaugural Etisalat Prize for African Fiction. Her short stories have received a number of awards, and her novel, An Island, was longlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize. The novel explores colonial histories and their aftermath, and asks questions around how one responds to the unexpected presence of a stranger. After the success of 'An Island,' Jennings co-founded the Island Prize with Holland House Book to enable debut African authors to find agents and publishers. Her novel 'Crooked Seeds' was longlisted for the 2025 Women's Prize for Fiction.

Photograph by Carol Coelho, from the website of Jennings' publisher, Karavan Press. www.karavanpress.com.



AMELIA PEGRAM

“It is my celebration. I will drum my drum. I will sing my song. I will dance my dance. I do not need your anaemic hands brought together in pale applause.”

Amelia Pegram was born in Cape Town in 1935. In 1963 she left South Africa for London where she studied Drama at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, performed on stage and in television and film productions, as well as doing radio plays for the BBC. In 1972 she moved to the United States, and taught English at the University of Louisville for many years. Her short stories and poems have been published in a number of anthologies and journals both in South Africa and internationally, including three volumes of poetry: *Our Sun Will Rise* (1989), *Echoes Across a Thousand Hills* (1994), and *Beneath the Baobab* (2005). She edited 'Nelson Mandelamandla' (1989) with fellow South African poet and academic, Cosmo Pieterse, a book of poetry dedicated to Nelson Mandela and which included poems by several South African poets in exile.

The photograph shows Pegram at the 1999 Middfest, an annual cultural festival held in Middletown, Ohio, in the USA.

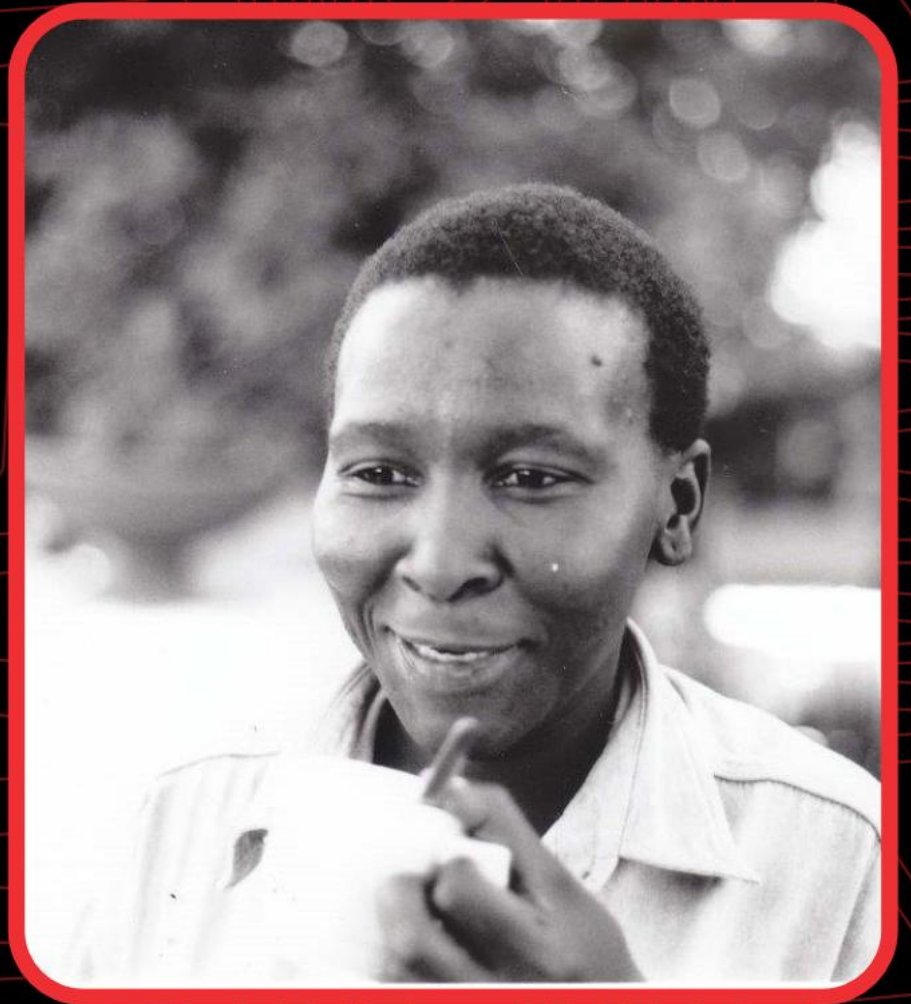


ISABELLA MOTADINYANE

“Amongst my ancestors, [I am] guided by three outstanding characters: a Christian poet, a sangoma and an aggressive dumbfounded instructor who facilitates messages among Christian prophets and sangomas.”

Isabella Motadinyane (1963-2003) was a performance poet, singer and dancer. With a life-long passion for the performing arts, she was a founding member of the Botsotso Jesters. Her poetry embraces several languages including her mother tongue, Sesotho, as well as English, Afrikaans, and Iscamtho, a hybrid language emerging from Johannesburg's townships. In her work she drew from the life and culture of the townships. She fiercely resisted patriarchy and egotism, and showed a humour that belied the many challenges she faced as a Black woman artist struggling to make a living.

In 2007 her *Collected Poems* was published, and later re-published as *Isabella Motadinyane: Complete Poems* (2016) and again as *Bella: Complete Poems* (2017).

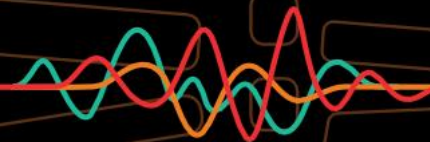


NONI JABAVU

“Two worlds with two loyalties; South Africa where I was born and England where I was educated. ... We were not ‘black Europeans’, yet I saw how we were not ‘white Bantu’ either.”

Born in Middledrift in the Eastern Cape, Helen Nontando (Noni) Jabavu (1919 - 2008) was a pioneering South African writer who worked and lived all over the world. She grew up in the family home in Middledrift and on the Fort Hare University campus. She began her career in England as a freelance writer and radio journalist for the British Broadcasting Corporation. *Drawn in Colour* (1960) was the first book published by a Black South African woman, followed by her most famous work, *The Ochre People* (1963). Jabavu was also the first Black person to edit an important British literary magazine, *The New Strand*. She also authored a series of popular columns for the *Daily Dispatch* in 1977, which made her a household name in South Africa. Black women of her era were not expected to write professionally, or to travel extensively. Jabavu made a life doing both.

The photo shows Jabavu in London in 1960.



ATHAMBILE MASOLA

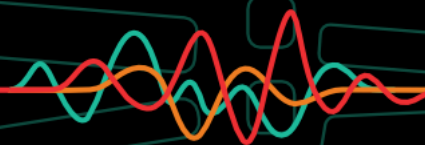
“I grew up believing I could be anything I wanted to be in the world. I was able to use my imagination because I was exposed to various ideas throughout my learning at school.”

Athambile Masola is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Cape Town, where she specializes in Black women's life writing and historiography. As well as an academic, she is a poet and a creative writer. She has written and published both literary and academic works, including both solo projects collaborations with other authors and academics. *Ilifa* (2021) is her debut collection of isiXhosa poetry, and *Noni Jabavu: A Stranger at Home* (2023) was co-edited with Makhosazana Xaba. In 2022 *Ilifa* received the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences 'Best Fiction: Poetry' prize.

Photo by Nonzuzo Gxekwa, from the website of the Open Book Festival.



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FATIMA DIKE

“I have journeyed to seeing what has become of our political ideals and I want to do all I can to fight wrong as we did before. I don't just believe the theatre is the place to achieve these things. I know it is.”

Fatima Dike was born in Langa township in 1948. Working at a bookshop led to a passion for dramatics. In the early 1970s while volunteering as a stage manager at the iconic Space Theatre in Cape Town, she wrote her first play, 'The Sacrifice of Kreli,' which became the first published play by a Black woman writer. Between 1979 and 1983 Dike lived in the United States and worked in theatres. She then returned to her home in Lang to continue her career as a playwright, actor, director and mentor. Working primarily in English but also in Afrikaans and IsiXhosa, her plays resonated both within her community and beyond. With the playwright and director Roy Sargeant, Dike founded the Siyasanga South African Theatre Company in 2002, which aimed to offer opportunities to aspiring actors and writers. She lectures at the New Africa Theatre in Cape Town and is a highly respected teacher and mentor.



OUMA KATRINA ESAU

“Our language is written in its own style and format ... *Tortoise and Ostrich* will hopefully chart a path to remembering Africa's authentic identity.”

Ouma Katrina Esau is the last keeper of an ancient tongue. She is the last remaining fluent speaker of N|uu, one of the oldest surviving Khoisan languages, and she has dedicated her life to ensuring her ancestral mother tongue does not fade from memory and into silence. She has taken bold strides in literature and preservation, and published the first ever N|uu Children's Book, *!Qhoi n/a Tjhoi* (*Tortoise and Ostrich*), a trilingual book written in N|uu, Afrikaans, and English. In this way she passes ancient storytelling down to the next generation. She has contributed her lifelong knowledge to the comprehensive *N|uu Dictionary* and the trilingual learning reader *Ouma Geelmeid ke k'xu //xa//xa N|uu*, and founded the ǀX!āqe (Gaze at the Stars) language school in her own back yard to teach local children her language and heritage.

Photo from Wikipedia.



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NADIA DAVIDS

“Being taught early about the complex, varied, layered history of Islam at the Cape, about the community's trauma-soaked pathway of survival moved me deeply and made me want to write about it.”

An award-winning playwright, writer, and researcher, Nadia Davids was born in Cape Town. Her writing engages with memory, place, migration, and the intricate histories of the Western Cape. Her celebrated debut play *At Her Feet* (2002) explores the lives of Muslim women in Cape Town, and won multiple awards. *What Remains* (2017) won the Fleur du Cap Awards Best New South African Play, while her novel *An Imperfect Blessing* was longlisted for the Sunday Times Fiction Prize and shortlisted for the Pan-African Etisalat Prize for Literature. Davids served as President of PEN South Africa.

Photo from Nadia Davids' website.



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