

“The truth isn’t always beauty, but the hunger for it is.”



Nadine Gordimer. Image: time.com



Lauren Beukes. Image: designIndaba.com



Gcina Mhlophe. Image: 21icons.com

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The South African education system tends to ignore South African literature, instead focusing on celebrated European and American works. This is a pity because South Africa has a rich literary history which cannot be overlooked. Literary critics around the world are arguing for the need to move away from the traditional canon and embrace the work of writers – particularly female writers – who have, until now, not been deemed worthy of “classic” status. With this in mind, *Perdeby* has a look at female writers who have shaped South Africa’s literary landscape.

“When the curtain falls no one is ready.” – Olive Schreiner
Olive Schreiner was one of the first women in South Africa to publish a novel. *The Story of an African Farm*, which was written under the pseudonym Ralph Irons, is also considered to be one of the first feminist novels.

Schreiner was born to British missionary parents in what is now the Eastern Cape in 1855. When she grew up she decided to become a governess, and travelled across the Eastern Cape for work. Some of her experiences, particularly with the Fouché family, inspired *The Story of an African Farm*.

Schreiner returned to Great Britain in 1880, where she studied nursing. By 1881, however, she realised that her poor health would not allow her to complete the necessary training, and decided to turn to writing full-time.

“At four in the afternoon the old moon bleeds radiance into the grey sky.” – Nadine Gordimer

Nadine Gordimer became the first South African writer to win the coveted Nobel Prize in Literature, which she was awarded in 1991. Upon giving Gordimer the award, the Nobel Prize jury remarked that, “through her magnificent epic writing, [she] has – in the words of Alfred Nobel – been of very great benefit to humanity”. Gordimer remains the only South African female writer to have won the prize.

Because Gordimer’s work confronted racial and moral issues, it is no surprise that many of her works were banned by the apartheid government. She was dedicated to the anti-apartheid movement and was a member of the then-banned ANC.

Gordimer made a profound contribution to South African literature. Her illustrious life came to an end in July when she died in her sleep.

“Waar swart en wit hand aan hand / vrede en liefde kan bring in my mooi land.” (Where black and white hand in hand / Can bring peace and love to my beautiful land.) – Antjie Krog

Antjie Krog wrote the poem ‘*Kyk, ek bou vir my ‘n land*’ in 1970 when she was still at school. The poem is vehemently anti-apartheid and, as well as shocking the conservative Afrikaans community of Kroonstad, marked the beginning of Krog’s career as a protest poet. Besides apartheid, Krog’s poetry is concerned with love, the role of women, and gender politics.

Krog has published many volumes of poetry, including three volumes of children’s poetry. She has also written five novels, the most famous being *Country of My Skull*.

Krog is a UP graduate, having obtained an MA in Afrikaans from the university in 1976.

“I had at last decided to free myself of the shackles which had bound not only my hands, but also my soul.” – Miriam Tlali
Miriam Tlali’s novel *Muriel at Metropolitan* is embedded in South African literary history because it is the first novel that was written by a black, female writer to be published. She is also one of the first South African writers to embrace Soweto as a subject matter.

“The universe will teach you / For as long as you are willing to receive” – Gcina Mhlophe

Gcina Mhlophe is famous for her oral poetry and storytelling. She is one of the few female storytellers and presents her work in English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa.

Mhlophe’s first job was as a domestic worker but she eventually became a radio newsreader and then a writer. **“There are only so many plots in the world. It’s how you unfold them that makes them interesting.” – Lauren Beukes**
Beukes is currently enjoying her status as one of South Africa’s top writers. Her writing career has encompassed journalism, short stories, non-fiction, novels, TV scripts and even comic books.

Beukes’s second novel, *Zoo City*, is by far her most critically acclaimed work, having been nominated for 13 awards both in South Africa and internationally. The novel won two of these awards, the 2011 Arthur C Clarke Award and the 2010 Kitschies Red Tentacle. A movie adaption of *Zoo City* is currently in the works.