

# Spotlighting the true heroes of our nation

**MUNYA VOMO**

**O**NE thing that South Africa, and the continent at large, needs is role models. And not the celebrity types – those we have enough of.

We are talking about the people whose lives can be used to inspire others. *21 Icons* is a show on SABC3 that allows young people who have achieved something to tell their stories in order to inspire others.

After two successful seasons, the show returns for a third installment and some new names have been thrown into the mix.

We meet Kopano Matlwa Mabaso, a medical doctor pursuing a PhD in public health at the University of Oxford and an author of the critically acclaimed books, *Coconut* and *Spilt Milk*. All this she has achieved at the young age of 30.

“I love writing. I write because I need to, because it sustains and energises me. Writing allows me to do everything else that I do,” she explained.

Mabaso made the cut for *21 Icons*’ South African season three as a mouthpiece for the young South Africans who have to deal with issues such as race, poverty and gender. She also helps people to understand issues around identity. Some of her accomplishments include making healthcare equally accessible to people from all walks of life.

“My discomfort provoked me to write. Growing up in post-apartheid South Africa as a black, young South African, I was grappling with my sense of identity in a very complicated country. So I wrote about this discomfort,” she said.

Born in Pretoria, Matlwa Mabaso was only 9-years-old in 1994 when South Africa became a democratic state. In her book, *Coconut*, she wrote about her experiences growing up as a young black girl “born free” in the new South Africa and described some of the complexities around finding a sense of belonging.

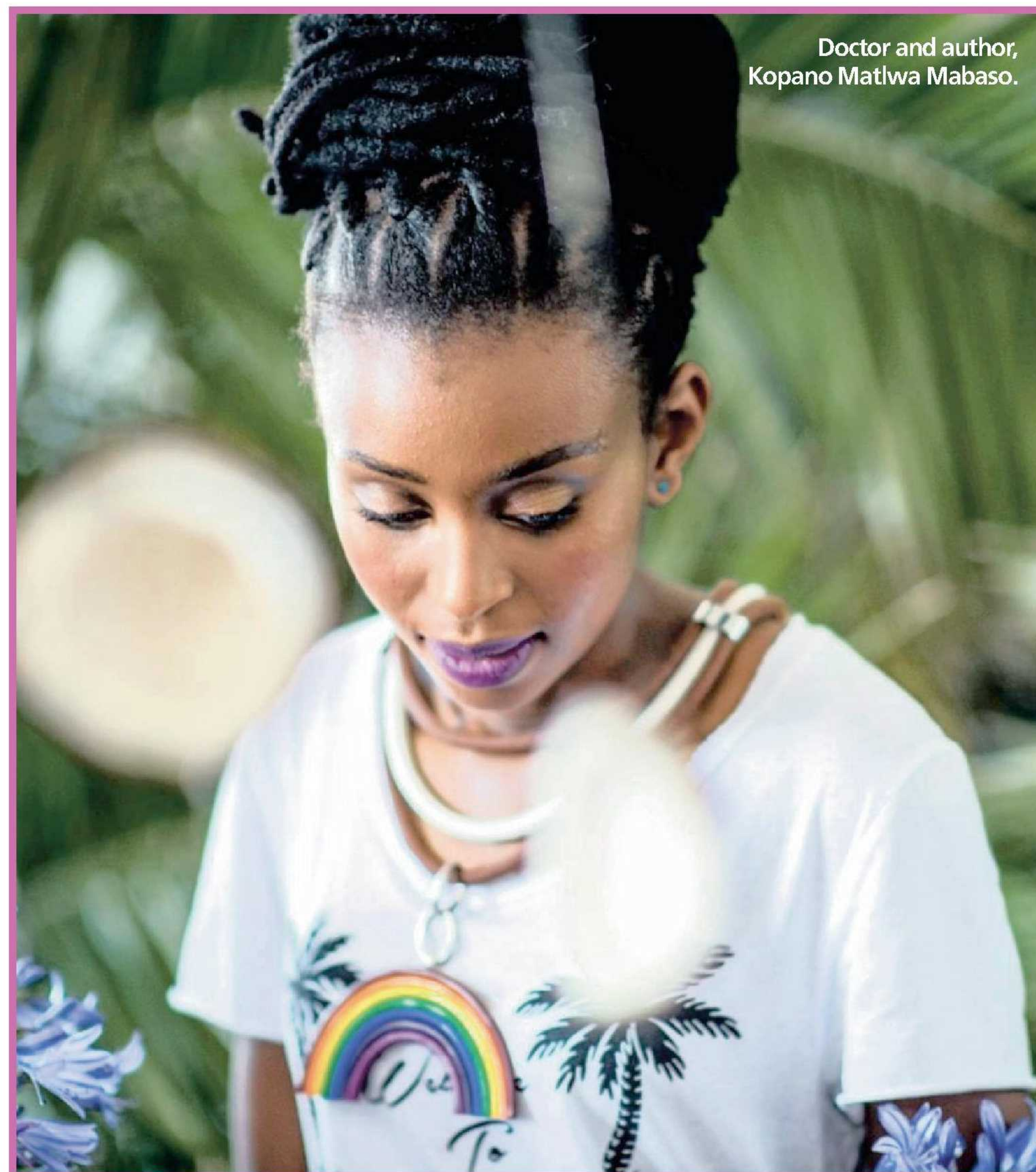
“I write about things that I find difficult. *Coconut* began when I was in high school, trying to figure out my own identity and often what was considered to be good was everything white and the challenge of finding a place and meaning as a black young South African. *Spilt Milk* came from grappling with the South Africa that I live in. I write about what bugs me,” she said.

So what does she like more: being an author or a doctor?

“I could never choose between medicine and writing. Anton Chekhov said: ‘Medicine is my wife and writing my mistress’, and that makes complete sense to me. I love them both,” she said.

The show is shot as a short film series and is documented as talks between Gary van

Doctor and author,  
Kopano Matlwa Mabaso.



Wyk, the photographer and film-maker and the “icons”.

Adrian Steirn, who created the show, joins Van Wyk as one of the photographers

capturing the behind-the-scenes images.

● **21 Icons** airs every Sunday on SABC 3 at 7.27pm