

# Writer Tlali makes it to list of icons

Series hails first black woman author

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A GOOD book can change a person; their outlook, their persona. It can change a human being into something they never thought they could be. A good book can reinvent a person but that change must come from inside.

This is according to Miriam Tlali, who is this year's 19th icon of the acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa, an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their respective fields.

Tlali, of Doornfontein, Johannesburg, was the first black woman in South Africa to publish a novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan*, a semi-autobiography. She is also the author of the critically acclaimed *Amandla*.

The 21 ICONS series is part of an annual project that features unique narrative portraits and short films by pre-eminent photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn.

On Tlali's selection as an icon Steirn says: "Miriam was the first black woman to publish a book in

South Africa and she accomplished this during apartheid, which is truly remarkable given the hostility of the time and the responsibility that came with it.

"Against all odds she managed to type her first novel. She was a young, inexperienced, penniless and untrained writer, and through perseverance and strength of character, and despite the challenges, difficult circumstances and adverse conditions, she triumphed."

Tlali attributes her lifelong passion for reading to her educators.

"We had very good teachers. These people had been the first royal readers. They had learnt teaching under the United Peoples' Party and they all spoke English really well."

Matriculating at the age of 15, Tlali yearned to study literature at the Wits University, but this was not an option due to the reservation of positions for white students.

With her hands full of Thackeray and Dickens classics, she settled for the Pius XII Catholic University (now the University of Lesotho) instead. Unable to continue her



TRAILBLAZER: Miriam Tlali is the first black woman to publish a novel in South Africa.

studies due to financial constraints Tlali found a job as a bookkeeper at a furniture store.

Feeling demotivated and despondent at this job, she felt she was employed by people who "were busy stalking Africans", she left her position to be a stay-at-home mother and look after her ailing mother-in-law in 1969.

It was then that Tlali penned and completed *Muriel at Metropolitan*.

"I was surprised that I was the first black woman to write a book. I took it for granted that there must be someone else who had authored literature, only to find out that when I had finished writing and submitted it to the publisher, that I was in fact the first African woman in South Africa to write and publish a book."

The novel was only published six

years later in 1975 and, in 1979, it was banned by the apartheid government. However, it was published internationally under the title *Between Two Worlds* by Longman African Classics.

The government censored her work and edited out certain chapters, certain phrases, certain sentences.

"I was in Lesotho at the time and I tried to stay away from South Africa because I was ashamed of this book, the way they had cut it, and I didn't like it."

Tlali published her second novel *Amandla* – meaning power – in 1980.

Based on the 1976 Soweto student uprising, the novel was very different from her first and displayed an activist stand.

It was duly banned weeks after it was published but it was translated

into several languages, including Japanese, Polish, German and Dutch.

In 1984, she wrote a collection of short stories titled *Mihloti* (tears) and, in 1989, *Footprints in the Quag* was published.

As an author, Tlali has travelled the world and represented South Africa in several countries. In 1978, she was invited to an international writing programme at Iowa State University in the US. Between 1989 and 1990, she was a visiting scholar at the Southern African Research Programme at Yale University.

For her contribution to the literary profession, Tlali has received many accolades, including a Literary Lifetime Achievement Award and the presidential award, the Order of Ikhamanga (silver).

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