

# The luxury of being ordinary

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The Columbia guide to South African literature in English since 1945

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## Review Title:

The luxury of being ordinary

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This fine volume comprises a chronology, a thoughtful introductory essay, and its contents are divided into two parts (the first part deals with authors since 1945, the second with those prior to this date; the second part, falling outside of the range specified by the title, is much briefer in its overall extent, yet its specific entries are as substantial as those in the first part). Select bibliographies accompany the individual entries, and an extensive bibliography is provided at the end. The work is, thus, both a useful introduction to South African literature in English, and a valuable literary resource. What makes it especially attractive, to both the newcomer and the established reader in the field, is the introductory essay, 'South African Literature in English Since 1945: Long Walk to Ordinarity' (pp. 1–42). The subtitle, of course, alludes to Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* in what might at first seem a rather forced way. However, the concluding paragraph of the essay, coming after the dense, though necessarily brief, historical review of the period, establishes the fitting nature of the subtitle:

[South African] literature has at last shrugged off the obligation constantly to rehearse what Fredric Jameson famously called the 'national allegory'. Or, to put it another way, 'the signs are out that South African literature is at last enjoying the luxury of being 'ordinary.' (p. 35)

The introductory essay, all too aware of the compromised nature of historical grand narratives (and perhaps over-apologetic in this regard), nevertheless believes that, 'there remains a place for the selective ordering and clarifying narrative of literary emergence' (p. 1), and it proceeds to detail this emergence with reference to specific periods and notable individual authors within these periods. The apartheid year periods (1948–1973 & 1974–1990), in reflecting the national disunity of experience amongst the writers, are also divided according to racial groups, under the headings 'White Writing', and 'Writing Black'. Appropriately, the post-apartheid period is not subject to this distinction, providing a formalist endorsement of the removal of barriers embedded in the structure of the essay itself. What is notable, and attractive, about the introductory essay, is the way it includes brief analyses and samples of actual literary works, thereby providing the reader with a taste of the representative titles mentioned. This illustrates, at first hand, as it were, the quality of the texts which encyclopedia-type entries are perforce only able to name or, at best, briefly outline. The introductory essay, and the collection as a whole, is informed by the notion of literary merit: 'it is the responsibility of literary critics... to make discriminations of value and significance based on perceptions of literary merit' (p. 4). This is a very important consideration in the study of South African literature, where so much of what was produced in the 'interregnum' period prior to 1990 depended, for its full force, on its historical context. The essay puts the matter in sensitively credible terms:

The problem with texts that perform the politically useful function of supplementing history ('committed' literature, *littérature engagée*) is that they are in a sense incomplete without the history that they are supplementing: they require a real-world context coeval with and identical to their representations in order to perform their referential-cum-ethical function of bearing witness. Once that context is removed (by political change, by the simple efflux of time), it is as if the text is deprived of a crucial and even life-sustaining support (p. 8).

Thus, in the introductory essay at least, enduring works and authors are highlighted (not without critical caveats and qualifications). The apartheid year periods are illustrated with reference to the following: Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*; Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World* (and other of her novels, with *Burger's Daughter* being given pride of place); Dan Jacobson's *A Dance in the Sun*; Guy Butler; Athol Fugard; Herman Charles Bosman; Es'kia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*; Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy*; Alex la Guma's *A Walk in the Night*; Mongane Serote; J.M. Coetzee; Stephen Watson; Don Maclennan; James Matthews; Njabulo Ndebele's critical and creative writing; Bessie Head; and Miriam Tlali. The postapartheid period is illustrated by these (amongst others, and, again, without certain reservations: Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*; Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*; Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*; and Coetzee's *Disgrace*).

Exemplary of the verve of the presentation of texts in the introductory essay, is the section on *Cry, the Beloved Country* (pp. 9–10), which includes an account of the chequered reception of the novel since 1948, leading up to its present socio-historical vindication (with a wry look at the possible influence of globalisation on literary reputation):

The rehabilitation of the novel was completed by the posthumous award to Paton by President Mbeki of South Africa's highest decoration for civic achievement, the *Order of Ikhamanga* (Gold), in 2006. (Cynics might prefer to say that this rehabilitation had already been achieved by the novel's selection by Oprah Winfrey as her Book Club Classics choice in October 2003...) (p. 10).

The entries themselves are necessarily brief, but often include carefully selected lists of 'Further Reading'. A major figure, such as Coetzee, obviously receives more space, some four and a half double-columned pages (pp. 71–75), and Ndebele

and Mphahlele each span one and a half pages (pp. 146–148; pp. 142–143). The proportioning is fair, in the light of the criterion of international influence. Afrikaans writers who have also written in English, or whose works have been translated into English, are included.

As indicated above, the book is useful both to the newcomer and the established reader. It is presented as a 'guide' and, in the nature of such things, serves as a useful instructive tool to aid in further exploration of this branch of literature. It is also a handy resource on anyone's desk, being weighty only in content.