

FOREWORD

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In her acceptance speech as the first South African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, Nadine Gordimer touched on the essential value of writing, both for the individual and for her society. Her words go to the heart of the achievements of the prize winning DUT students whose writings appear in this book.

... We spend our lives attempting to interpret through the word the readings we take in the societies, the world of which we are part. It is in this sense, this inextricable, ineffable participation, that writing is always and at once an exploration of self and of the world; of individual and collective being. (Nadine Gordimer, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, 1991)

Creative writing is a form of magic. Not the superficial magic that modern technology churns out in a tsunami of glib, disconnected fragments on our phones, but a true magic: engaging us in authentic explorations of our own and others' cultures and identities through the sheer joy of storytelling.

Why creative writing at university? As an example of higher education that lacked cultural depth, a university colleague of mine liked to quote the example of a student he encountered in an advanced science course in Britain. The student was from Central Asia, and had a postgraduate qualification in mining. When quizzed, the student admitted that their entire curriculum back home was packed with very specific

information on the qualities of rocks, sophisticated mining equipment and related technology. That's all. Students there learned little or nothing of the literature, music, history or culture of their home country. They had been trained to a high degree of expertise, but in a very narrow way. These students were little more than finely-tuned cogs in an industrial machine. How equipped were they to best judge how to contribute their knowledge in a social context? What was the significance of mining in their history and its potential to improve the quality of life of the people and their environment?

I am an African. I cannot be proud of my culture and heritage if I fail to cohabit. My hopes are senseless if I ignore the plight of the discontented. That is what African culture is about, not airbrushed folklore and enervated attempts to label some as more African than others. (Golden Nyamapfene, 1st Prize, Essay - DUT Creative Writing Competition 2015)

The Writing Centre at Durban University of Technology prides itself in fostering enquiry and critical thinking, integrity and professionalism, diligence and accountability and commitment to equality of opportunity: the hallmarks of a good citizen. The Writing Centre aims to draw out each person as Nadine Gordimer says, in an “exploration of self and of the world; of individual and collective being”. The Centre started as a small but enthusiastic enterprise at City Campus, but soon caught on among students across all faculties as the value of its activities grew clearer to users. It thrives on participation and collaborative learning, and evidence abounds of its positive impact on students' writing and reading skills. There's a double advantage here: better course performance and improved student community participation and responsibility.

The Writing Centre promotes both academic and creative writing among students. Creative writing and critical reading intertwine to create a “gymnasium of the mind” (Costello 2013: 1133) where students train their intellects using words and ideas that lead to clarity of thought, imaginative idea-building and logical reasoning. These, of course, are the very skills needed for academic success, good citizenship and social responsibility. Beyond the essentials of daily tutoring and mentoring, the Writing Centre established an annual competition for student creative writing, and I had the pleasure of serving on the adjudication panel for several years. I was consistently impressed with the quality of student contributions, and the ingenuity, social awareness and verbal brilliance of the entrants. How appropriate then to publish a permanent record of winning entries as a homage to those who are represented, and an inspiration for students today.

I have to tie my shoes, lest the shoelaces of
despair cause me to trip and fall,
Lest the voices of the cynical and the naysayers
stop me in my sprint.
Please, just let me tie my shoes
Because today I've made the decision, to take
this journey,
Out of the woods, of mental slavery ...
(Siboniso Ngcobo, 1st Prize, Poetry - DUT
Creative Writing Competition, 2016)

Creative writing provides us with a perspective on how others behave and react, and to vicariously experience the moral space they inhabit. To look at our own society through the eyes of Zakes Mda, Lewis Nkosi, Alan Paton or Mbulelo Mzamane is to find ourselves immersed in the lived experiences they conjure with words. The Writing Centre's

annual creative writing competition opens a space for students to discover their own authentic voices, what Martha Nussbaum calls the narrative imagination: the ability “to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of someone different from oneself; to be an intelligent reader of that person's story [...] including the many ways in which social circumstances shape emotions and wishes and desires” (Nussbaum 1998: 10-11). We cannot be truly critical unless we are able to locate the importance of something within the context of others' backgrounds and social roles. So, while the narrative imagination is essential for creative writing, it extends way further into any type of writing: in business, industry or public life. Once you successfully engage the reader, and convey your meaning with clarity, you can apply this as much to a short story as to the presentation of a science project.

This book is published in honour of the late Professor Thengani Ngwenya, African literature scholar and unflinching champion of student writing development at the university. From the inception of the annual writing competition, Professor Ngwenya gave generously of his time and expertise, and the contents of this volume bear witness to his dedication over the years.

My best wishes to the students, writing centre staff and leadership who have made this volume speak to the success of writing excellence at the Durban University of Technology.

African literature is about a place most people have not visited, even in imagination. It is a place worth getting to know. The sights and sounds are unique. The rain beats heavily on tin and thatched roofs. When rain stops, a small bird begins to sing in a mango tree. Then people come out, talking. On their way, they meet

others and stop for a while to talk some more. The conversation may be in any of the eight hundred languages spoken on the continent, but it is undeniably African. In the spoken word may be found the quality that some African writers have called the genius of African civilisation. And in the spoken word there is magic. The spoken word, always fresh, is the source of all African literature. History will judge us if we shut that door to the world.

(Nkosinathi Mkhize, 1st Prize, Essay DUT Creative Writing Competition, 2017)

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