



BOOKS

MAGIC BROUGHT HOME

For literary luminary Zakes Mda, storytelling is part memory, part imagination and a good deal of research

Words by Cayleigh Bright

A game-changing voice in South African literature, Zakes Mda continues the fearless innovation and experimentation that have defined his career. The author's recent books have included historical fiction, a touch of magical realism, his first tale set outside SA and his own life story. (Some might even argue that his best work can be found in his ever-sharp, sometimes-scathing Twitter responses.)

GG: *Little Suns* has a connection to your own family. Is it one that you've been wanting to tell for a while?

Zakes Mda: I never thought of writing it, or setting it as fiction, until much later, after writing my memoir, I had to refer to this story. My grandfather used to tell us about this guy... but then, of course, the story would also be mixed with a lot of myth and legend. I grew up knowing that this guy was such a powerful medicine man that when the British tried to shoot him their bullets turned into water. That fascinated me.

I think that some of my source of magical

realism comes from growing up hearing such stories. It was only after writing my memoir that I thought, 'I should write about this stuff.' I start to write, and then I come across something I don't know, and stop and look it up, and research it and so on, and read about it, or interview people about it, and then continue to tell my story, and come across some part which leads to further research. I believe that the most sensible, most effective historical novel is the one that speaks to the present. The past is always a strong presence in our present. In my view, I wrote an historical novel because it addresses itself to the issues that we are grappling with, even today.

GG: What do you think is the most important debate or discussion for South African literature at the moment?

ZM: I find your question very difficult because I don't follow debates. I create art. I leave debates to you – scholars and critics and readers. I'm not going to create work and then go out to debate about it – defend it or explain it. I hear debates about 'writers should be doing this now', or 'writers should be doing that', but I'm not interested in that. I have only one interest: to create art.

GG: That's refreshing to hear, given the trend towards doing a bit of everything.

ZM: I'm against prescription – that we prescribe that 'writers must not be critics', or 'writers must be critics'. I choose not to be part of debates because I find them a waste of my time – the time that I should be using to create art. But it works for others, and if it does, good luck to them. I cannot prescribe to them, and say that they must only confine themselves to creating art and not be critics.

GG: What are your thoughts on social media and reading culture?

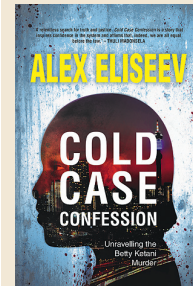
ZM: Twitter has contributed a lot to the new wave of reading that you see in SA now. People are reading books. To some extent, it's happening all over, but more so in SA. I think that it's much more effective: you go to other media that don't have that 140-character limit, and people waffle.

GG: Knowing that your books are read for pleasure, studied in schools and universities, and now recommended from reader to reader online, do you think much about the changing ways in which readers first experience them?

ZM: That's something that, as a writer, you can't control. People will read your work any way and any how – that's their business. When you create art – when you write novels, things like that – if you spend all your time worrying where your readers read... No. You write the thing, then it's out there, then you move on, to the next project.

TRUE AND IMPROVED

A new book about an old case fits right in with a movement towards real-life crime storytelling that's far more than just gore



Cold Case Confession: Unravelling the Betty Ketani Murder by Alex Eliseev (Pan MacMillan, R213)

The story starts with a murder that's been cooling for a good few years by the time the author begins to investigate it in 2012, but takes a chilling turn in the form of a letter apparently carrying a confession, found under a carpet. What follows is a fascinating look at SA's criminal processes and how a cast of real-life characters do the near-impossible: solving a murder without a dead body.

Cold cases aren't new – unsolved crimes brought to light have long been loved by audiences. Just look at the success of the *Serial* podcast, which hooked listeners with its quality journalism, excellent storytelling and intriguing premise: that its subject had been serving time since 1999 for a crime he didn't commit.

It's here that award-winning investigative journalist Alex Eliseev walks in with *Cold Case Confession: Unravelling the Betty Ketani Murder*. The timing is fortuitous rather than intentional: the story is 13 years in the making, following a drawn-out trial. While it's something of a crime writing cliché that a good murder mystery needs a body on the first page, part of what makes this case remarkable is the absence of one – Betty's was never found.

More of what makes it so readable is Eliseev's empathy. Thanks to years of investigation, a conviction resulted – not a spoiler alert for anyone who follows the news. In Betty's case though, there's no unlikely hero to be saved from wrongful accusations, or young life to be salvaged from a life behind bars, but it's a tale of justice served nevertheless.