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*Navigating
Literary Bridges*

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Edited by:
Siphiwo Mahala

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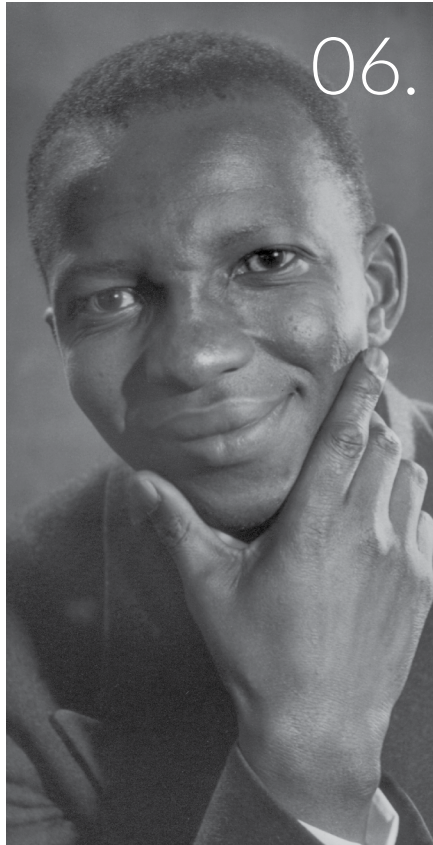
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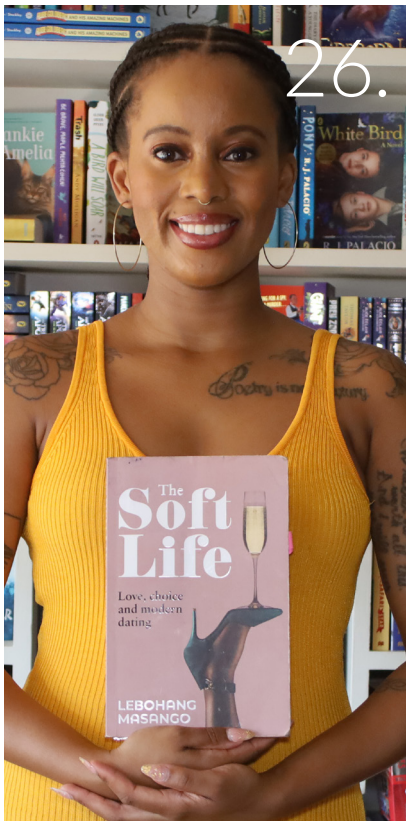
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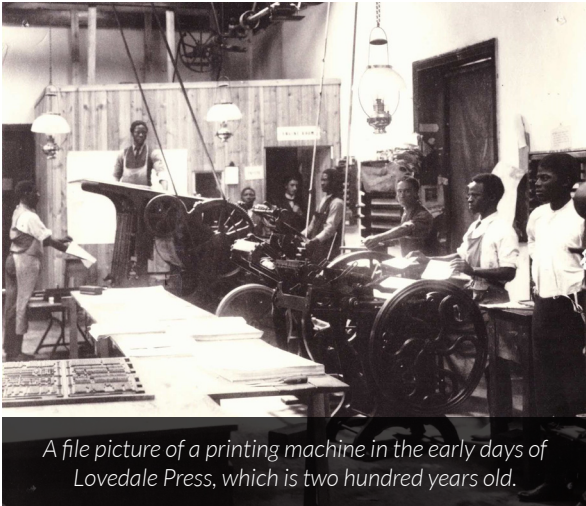


Sipiwo Mahala, PhD
Editor-in-Chief

Cherishing Moments, CREATING MEMORIES

“It is the storyteller who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have – otherwise their surviving would have no meaning.” These profound words by Chinua Achebe are germane to the thematic focus of this edition of *Imbiza*. Although Achebe in his 1988 interview with Bill Moyers may not have known that in 2023, a journal called *Imbiza* would hark back to history in a quest to find meaning for the present, he was aware of the power and longevity of the story. For in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), he tells us that: “It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it we are blind.”

If without the story we are blind, it goes without saying that the story illuminates our path as we navigate our way through the contours of our life’s journey. Writers, therefore, become the torchbearers who lead society in our forward-march as we delve into uncharted waters while at the same time chronicling our trajectory. History is more than just a series of dates and facts. It gives us a view into the interplay behind events to determine how we got to our present moment. It is a matter of historical inaccuracy that Achebe has often been unduly lauded as the “Father of Modern African Literature”, owing to the sterling contribution he made to the development of literature on the continent. Achebe has himself refuted this view, for the likes of his fellow Nigerian national, Amos Tutuola, Lesotho’s Thomas Mofolo, and South African



A file picture of a printing machine in the early days of Lovedale Press, which is two hundred years old.

writers such as S.E.K. Mqhayi, Sol T. Plaatje and A.C. Jordan, among others, precede him. In interrogating the recorded chronologies of African literature, one of the pertinent questions that author and academic, Mukoma Wa Ngugi raises is that, “why African literature means writing in European languages?”

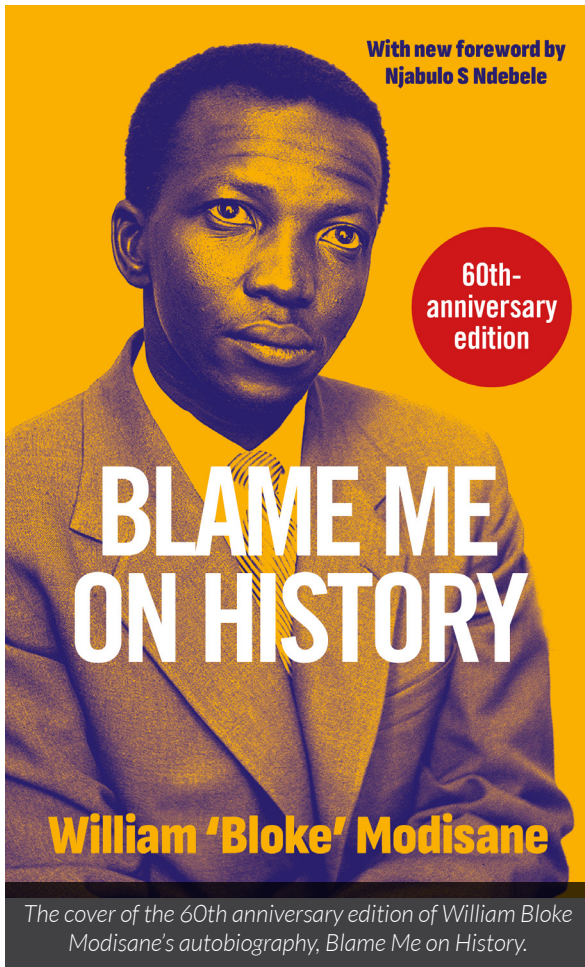
In this edition of *Imbiza* we trace the development of the written form of literature or what is popularly termed modern African literature. We do so in recognition of a number of anniversaries and milestones that have a bearing in the African literary landscape. The first publishing house in Sub-Saharan Africa was founded in 1823, exactly 200 years ago. Lovedale Press, situated in the small town of Alice in the Eastern Cape, was an initiative of the Glasgow Missionary Society and was established as part of the advancement of the colonial enterprise. The founding of Lovedale Press also saw the publication of the first Xhosa text in 1823. Notwithstanding that the first person to write in the language, Rev. John Bennie, was not a native speaker, the publication of his text contributed to the development of the written language and literature. Rev. Bennie opened pathways for many native Xhosa writers, including W.B. Rubusana, S.E.K. Mqhayi, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, J.J.R. Jolobe, P.T. Mtuze and others who took to their writing to redress some aspects of colonial legacy through different epochs. In this edition, Godfrey Vulindlela Mona gives us a glimpse into the historiography of isiXhosa as a written language, while Lukhanyo Makhenyane brings our attention to cotemporary Xhosa writers, and in particular, Zolani Mkiva as the exponent of the oral tradition.

The year 2023 also marks what would have been the centenary of a multidimensional South African writer, journalist and actor, William Bloke Modisane, who was born on 28 August 1923. Modisane is

best known as a journalist from the 1950s Drum magazine, where he worked alongside a pantheon of other illustrious scribes, including Henry Nxumalo, Todd Matshikiza, Can Themba, Hezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi and Nat Nakasa, among others. Modisane’s life story is documented in his riveting autobiography, *Blame Me on History*, which was published worldwide in 1963. This year also marks the 60th anniversary of the publication of this seminal book.

To mark these important milestones, the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS) hosted a Bloke Modisane Centenary Symposium, which saw scholars from a variety of backgrounds presenting on different aspects of Modisane’s oeuvre. It is also fitting that emanating from the symposium, an edited volume on Bloke Modisane is under way. Furthermore, JIAS, in collaboration with Jonathan Ball, the South African publishers of *Blame Me on History*, has now reprinted the text and made it available for access to contemporary readers. If there was a need to seek validation for the reprint of this seminal text, it is carried in the new foreword by distinguished literary scholar, Njabulo S. Ndebele, who writes: “Modisane’s book, read today by all South Africans, will expose our raw pasts, private and public in their nature, which are still present in many forms as unacknowledged antecedents.” The continued relevance of this book is yet another reminder that writers never die, their words breathe life into them beyond the grave.

The fourth edition of *Imbiza*, which came out in August 2022, carried an article by Elinor Sisulu, which profiled author Sindiwe Magona. Provocatively titled, “Don’t Honour My Death, Honour My Life”, the article emphasised the importance of celebrating our icons while they are still alive as per Magona’s injunction. Magona turns 80 on 27 August, and what better way to honour her than encouraging the reading of her work? Diane Shober takes us through Magona’s oeuvre in an essay titled, “Navigating the Incisive Literary Bridges of Sindiwe Magona”. She goes on to state, “Magona remains a crucial, critical, contemporary voice within the international literary landscape whose work keeps pace with changing global circumstances.” In April this year, a conference was held in the United States to celebrate Magona’s vast body of work. In June, she launched her latest book of essays, *I Write the Yawning Void* (2023). In this collection, she grapples with complex and sometimes contentious social issues in a simple and understated way. The essays are insightful, poignant and poetic, and typical of her writing, they are imbued with uniquely African aesthetics, as she deftly weaves Xhosa idiomatic expressions into the English language.



In 1983, Es'kia Mphahlele, also known as the doyen of African letters, established the African Literature Department at the University of the Witwatersrand. Over the past 40 years, the department produced a number of prominent scribes and scholars who played a very important role in shaping the literary landscape on the African continent. I was privileged to graduate from this department in 2003, and to have rubbed shoulders with Mphahlele himself, and fellow students such as Nokuthula Mazibuko Msimang, Phaswane Mpe, Grace Musila and Austin Tam George, among others. Novelists and short story writers Niq Mhlongo, Nedine Moonsamy and Nthikeng Mohlele were also part of the department, albeit at different times. We wish the department well on its 40th anniversary, and we trust that they will continue churning out talented, committed and highly productive graduates who will make exceptional contribution to the literary world.

It is with a deep sense of regret that the literary fraternity suffered a spate of deaths in recent times. One of the heaviest blows was the passing of writer, actor and academic, Professor Bankole Ajibabi Omotoso, popularly known as Kole Omotoso. Born in Nigeria in 1943, Omotoso relocated to South Africa

on the eve of the democratic dispensation in 1992. Over the past 30 years, he established himself as a transnational cultural interlocutor between South Africa and Nigeria. Widely celebrated in Nigeria as a writer and academic, in South Africa Omotoso worked as an academic before venturing into acting where he had more popular roles. He became one of the most recognisable faces in the advertising world featuring in the much recognisable Vodacom Advert with the tagline, “Yebo Gogo!” Although he often complained that popular media eclipsed his intellectual contribution, the advert remains iconic in the South African public. Notwithstanding his misgivings about the perceived triviality of the advert, Omotoso continued contributing to the world of the arts whenever possible. In 2015, when I was still working for the Department of Arts and Culture, I travelled with him to my hometown of Makhanda, where we hosted Africa Month programme. He was also part of the Think Tank comprised of leading intellectuals, thinkers and cultural activists established by the Minister of Arts and Culture.

Despite his ill-health, Omotoso continued contributing to the arts world and was a great supporter of *Imbiza*. Following the publication of our inaugural issue in 2021, he wrote a review for *The Guardian* in Nigeria titled, “Steaming Pot of Prose, Poetry, Profiles, Paintings...” Much as the article was complimentary in its nature, as a form of caution he raised some pertinent issues that afflict literary journals in Africa. “The sight of a new literary journal is a thing of joy and of sorrow. A thing of joy because it affirms the hope that springs eternally in the human heart” he wrote. “There is what is called abiku-syndrome, something, a baby who makes the trip of birth and death many times and refuses to stay. This is the disease, which afflicts our literary journals... We hope this will stay with us for a while.” Indeed, in establishing *Imbiza*, we were not oblivious to the funding and sustainability issues that afflict journals of this kind. Despite the difficulties, we soldier on, and we gracefully receive the well wishes and the positive thoughts that he wished upon us. He closed the piece with the following words of affirmation: “There is no doubt that the journal packs quite an incredible load of scintillating articles and features that are simply mouth-watering. This present package is evidence of what readers can expect from future editions. May this pot never stop steaming such tasty poetry, prose and so on and so forth.”

The profound sense of loss mingled with deep appreciation that I feel with the passing of Omotoso, is probably best expressed in Chiké Frankie Edozien’s tribute to the legendary Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo, who passed away in May.



The late Ama Ata Aidoo sitting next to Zakes Mda at the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda, during her visit to commemorate Africa Month in 2016.

Edozien writes: “Aunty Ama’s embrace was big. It was all encompassing. It was joyous.” In my limited interactions with Aidoo, I know that the big embrace is applicable both in its literal and figurative senses. She was a very compassionate and loving individual. One of the striking images etched on my mind is Zakes Mda wheeling Aidoo into the auditorium at Amazwi South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda in May 2016. That day, Mda read an extract from his memoir, *Sometimes There is a Void* (2012), which describes his love and respect for Aidoo. “She was indeed an African leader after my own heart,” he writes. This sense of respect and compassion is palpable in Edozien’s eulogy, which ends with these touching words: “But, most importantly, I thank you for showing me with your actions that I, too, must show up. That loving is intentional. I’m glad I had a part in giving you your flowers (and cake!) when you were here.” It is perhaps appropriate that we derive solace from Aidoo’s profound words, who wrote in her book, *No Sweetness Here* (1970), “Humans, not places, make memories.”

Imbiza also lost one of its loyal supporters and most consistent contributor, Gloria Bosman, who passed away in March. When she signed off on her last

article, which she did not end with her usual signature closing, “I rest”, we would not have imagined that it would be her last. Instead she ended her article with the words, “Amen”, and the deeper meaning of such a spectacular parting shot and the finality of the moment eluded us. We know better now and the best we can do is cherish the special moments we spent with her and celebrate the memories we created together. We are grateful to have lived in her lifetime, and to have her words immortalised in the pages of *Imbiza*, just like her musical voice resounds through the airwaves. In accordance with her middle name, Nosikhumbuzo, which loosely translates “Remembrance”, we will always remember her for the legacy of love, compassion and dedication.

A voice that occupied the airwaves as much as it did the literary space is feisty radio personality, exceptional debater and political analyst, Eusebius Mckaiser, who passed away in May. Mckaiser was a champion of African writing who turned every radio and social media platform he got into a literary outlet. I had the privilege of being interviewed by him on various radio stations that he worked for, including Power FM and Talk Radio 702. In addition to being homeboys, Mckaiser and I shared common

interests of chess, literature and politics. He was a compassionate, courageous and highly opinionated individual with very strong views. Where we differed, we did so robustly but respectfully. Zukiswa Wanner in her tribute, echoes my sentiments when she says: “While we are all the poorer for having lost him, we are all the richer for having known him.”

Our preoccupation with anniversaries and historic moments is all about appreciating the contribution that these individuals make in their lifetimes. It is also true that anniversaries come and go, but what remains is the literary tradition. While it is inevitable that there comes a time when one generation will have to leave the life’s stage, we are inspired by the emergence of a new crop of vibrant voices in the literary landscape. Sabata-mpho Mokae introduces us to the talent of Lebo Mazibuko, whose debut novel *Bantu Knots*, was published in 2021 to critical acclaim. Mokae juxtaposes Mazibuko’s work with that of the legendary Toni Morrison, and argues that it is a “story that will surely be relevant for many years”. Similarly, another debutant, Tshidiso Moletsane, punches above his weight with his debut novel *Junx* (2021), which continues to make waves in public discourse. The novel won the 2022 Sunday Times Fiction Award, arguably the most prestigious literary prize in South Africa. Moletsane acknowledges William Burroughs’s *Junkie* (1953) as the inspiration for the book. Moletsane was recently hosted by the University of Johannesburg where he discussed his work with literary scholars.

Our previous issues included multiple languages in line with the vision of embracing the diversity of the African continent and its Diaspora as espoused by the publication. In this edition, however, we are limited to only two languages – English and isiXhosa. The objective of confining this edition to only these two languages is to privilege more writing in and about isiXhosa on the special occasion of commemorating the 200th anniversary of its existence as a written language. This edition therefore, features poems, short stories and essays in both English and isiXhosa. Notwithstanding the special focus on anniversaries, *Imbiza* continues expanding its footprint both in terms of distribution as well as the vastness of its content. This edition includes the “Love Jones” discourse, which is captured by Lesego Plank as she reflects on a visit by African-American scholar, Kris Marsh, a professor from the University of Maryland in the United States of America. Marsh had discussions about her book, *The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class* (2023) with South African scholars. The literary feast in this edition also features writers from other African countries, including Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Lesotho.

This edition, therefore, is preoccupied with cherishing the contribution made by the past and present writers in contributing to the African literary tradition. The regular elements of *Imbiza* are augmented by the recognition of historic milestones and aesthetical enhancement of the publication. With regard to the visual and aesthetical aspects, we have introduced the new element of pinup posters, wherein we feature large images of writers designed to be kept for posterity. It is our view that writers deserve much more recognition than is currently the case. *Imbiza* is intentional about creating space for literary voices and profiling writers as both the chroniclers and purveyors of the truths of our historic moment. For if literature has to be an integral part of our daily lives, *Imbiza* must be the steaming pot of intellectual fermentation.



The late Gloria Bosman was featured in all the editions of Imbiza until her passing in March.