



Does 'SA literature' matter?

'NOW, 10 years after JM Coetzee left the country ... South African literature in English does not matter very much any more."

This sweeping – and to many, potentially devastating – comment, was uttered just a few weeks ago by veteran UCT-based critic Ian Glenn during his public spat with Imraan Coovadia.

In the context of his intra-UCT wrangle with Coovadia, Glenn's judgement serves to diminish Coovadia's importance as a South African author, but in a more general sense the statement deserves wider consideration.

Is it true that South African literature doesn't matter "very much any more"?

A few years ago, I published an academic article under the title, Does South African Literature Still Exist? In that piece, I asked whether the anti-apartheid imperative of "landlocked", special-case struggle literature had not fatally overdetermined what we used to call "SA Lit".

Not only did the symbolic and legislative conditions for such a literature disappear after 1990 (though not the material ones), but the world also became "post-national". It is a globalising world in which success as a writer increasingly demands readership – and content – beyond determinate borders.

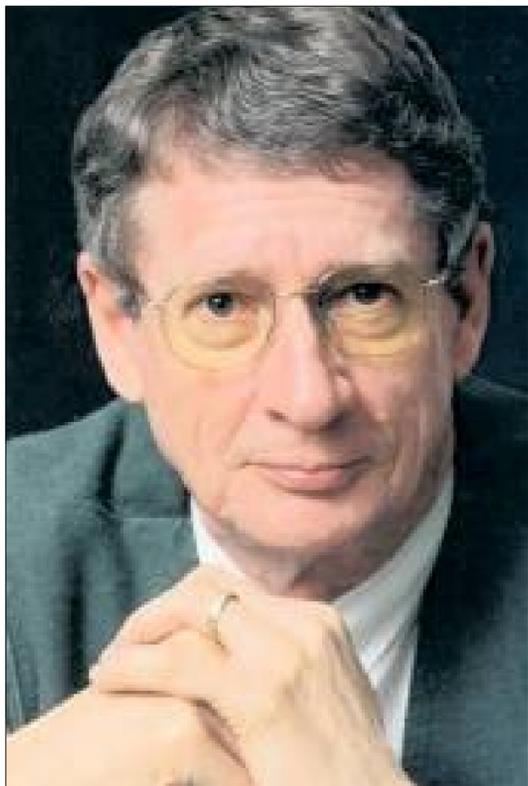
Simply put, "national" struggles such as apartheid – and national "exceptionalism" – no longer capture the world's attention. As a writer, you now need to speak to larger issues, breaching terrestrial boundaries.

In the wake of apartheid's end, the SA Lit "home industry" – built up at SA universities over about three decades by figures like Stephen Gray, Tim Couzens, Michael Chapman, Ian Glenn and others – quickly began to lose its steam.

Critical theory and cultural studies gradually eclipsed academic interest in SA Lit. It became a lot sexier in academia to write in one's own name on discursive trends relating to cities and subcultures, for example, than to opine boringly about the qualities of yet another Gordimer novel.

At the same time, "creative non-fiction" authors like Jonny Steinberg and Antony Albaker stole much of the limelight from the novelists who were trying to outdo Coetzee and Gordimer, and failing.

The end of South Africa's cultural narcissism has left the country's English-speaking writers in the lurch, writes Leon de Kock



ON TARGET: André Brink writes for two markets simultaneously.

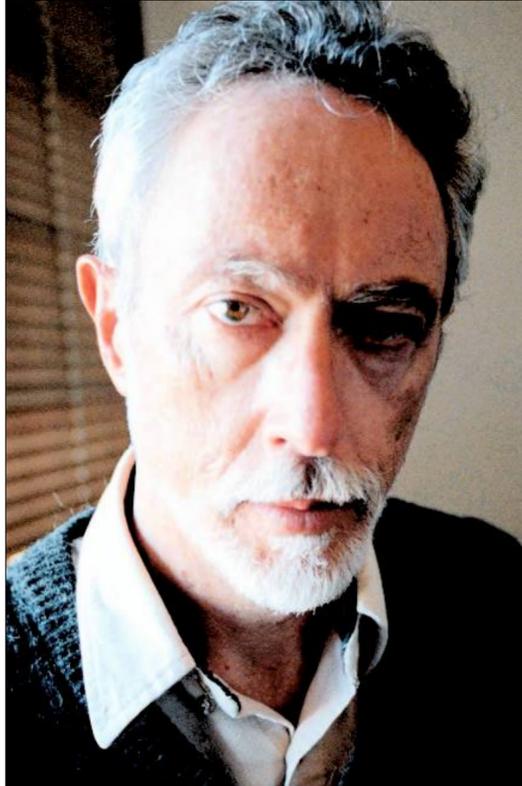
"Reality" seemed to be getting the better of "imagination".

In such a context, Glenn's claim that "SA literature does not matter very much any more" gains substantial credence, although one must distinguish between "English" SA Lit and its healthier Afrikaans

counterpart.

Unlike its wobbly-kneed English equivalent, the Afrikaans scholarly establishment continues to look after its own writers, and to curate and memorialise its own literary figures.

In fact, an Afrikaans writer is what you really want to be in the



CHANGE: JM Coetzee exemplifies the transition between old and new.

current context, because if you're good enough, you'll not only get some "national" validation (real reviews, real critical attention), but you'll also be translated into English and perhaps other languages – and then you can be exposed to the only market that matters any more: the transnational one.

André Brink has long been onto this game, writing for both the domestic Afrikaans market and the beyond-SA "English" market simultaneously.

If, in passing, some English-speaking South African readers (or, very unlikely, academics) pick up his work, that's all very well, but it's

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THIS IS THE NEW LIFE
OF THE OLD SA LIT,
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a mere windfall. The real action is elsewhere.

Pity the old-style SA "English" writer, who publishes a print run of a few hundred and sells only a smallish portion of that print run (as the joke goes, mostly to friends and extended family). Pity especially the SAE poets, who not only see a mere handful of sales, but must be content with a few bookshop events – hyped-up "launches" offering a simulacrum of scholarly discussion – because the academics, by and large, aren't remotely interested in reading them any longer. (I see nowadays they're taking to posting their poems on Facebook.)

In my own travels beyond South Africa over the past 10 years or so, and more recently, I've noticed the singular irony that "South African literature" is taken far more seriously as an academic subject in Europe and the US than it is on home ground.

So, when Glenn remarks that "most (critical) attention" in SA Lit now goes to thrillers such as Deon Meyer and Margie Orford – poor old Mike Nicol, formerly an SA Lit writer, now a crime writer, doesn't even crack a nod – he isn't far off the mark.

It's because thrillers are inherently (or potentially) transnational –

see how they zoom in on South African cities with the panoramic sweep of the "outside eye" movie camera, and then focus ever closer to reveal the muck under the beautiful surface. That's the basic trick.

Such works allow for a re-drawing of the formerly closed-in terrain with a wider, outside-in lens. Everything has turned inside out – and so must the writer.

It therefore makes perfect sense that our hottest current writer in world terms – important in view of the current paradigm of globalism in literary studies – is Lauren Beukes. Further, it makes sense that, after first doctoring Cape Town and Joburg out of all recognition, Beukes has now – in *The Shining Girls* – moved on to Chicago as her fictional setting.

Just recently I sat in a New York moviehouse and watched *Searching for Sugar Man*. This chronicle about how musician Rodriguez became wildly popular in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, while remaining unknown in his native US, vividly recalls a landlocked South Africa that is no more, a special-case nation where we could live in a hall of mirrors and indulge in a kind of extended cultural narcissism.

Then I watched an anodyne, weirdly musicalised Peter Brook production of Can Themba's story *The Suit* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and I realised: this is the new life of the old SA Lit. Transnationalised, and transformed. Other to itself: Isabel Hofmeyr, a foremost scholar of transnationalism, has been saying this for a while, and her new book, *Gandhi's Printing Press*, will say it much better. But it still takes some getting used to.

For all these reasons, JC Kannemeyer's biographical tome on JM Coetzee – a fine, modest, and monumental work, which partly started the trouble between Coovadia and Glenn – stands out as a beacon of a passing order, when individual greatness in relation to a particular national identity still mattered. Coetzee, in fact, exemplifies the transition between the old and the new orders.

Glenn is right about South African literature not mattering very much anymore, but the reasons for this condition go far beyond a mere ranking of individual writers. The world, quite literally, has changed.

De Kock is professor of English at Stellenbosch University and the author of fiction, poetry, literary translation and works of criticism.

How Coetzee adapted 'Slow Man' for the US media

PATRICK DENMAN FLANERY

IN THE June 27, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker*, perhaps the most avowedly metropolitan of American periodicals, an extended excerpt from JM Coetzee's then-forthcoming novel, *Slow Man*, published later that year in Britain and America, appeared under the title *The blow*. The excerpt was taken from the first 14 chapters of the book and is presented as an autonomous long short story, substantially and silently edited for style and length.

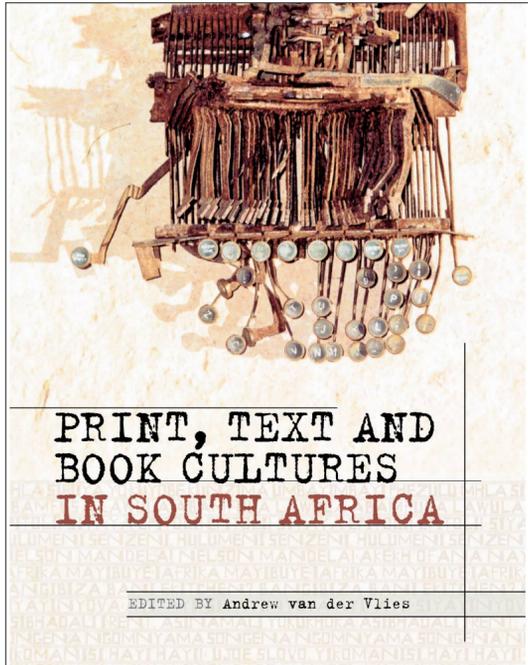
The contributor's bio notes Coetzee's Nobel Prize (awarded in 2003), but not his nationality or his migration to Australia in 2002.

The *New Yorker* is perhaps better known for its sophisticated wit and metropolitan sensibility than for engagements with or even hosting of the kind of fiction one might now describe as Coetzeean, thinking specifically of his works' formal and narrative complexity, although not his Nobel laureate status.

Nadine Gordimer has been a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1951.

Apart from Gordimer, no other major South African writer before Coetzee had published fiction in the magazine. Effectively, the publication of South (ern) African writers is a rarity. Writers from other African countries generally have not fared much better – Africa's other two Nobel laureates in literature, Naguib Mahfouz and Wole Soyinka, have not been published in the magazine.

What is most suggestive about Coetzee's appearance in *The New Yorker* is the extent to which, even with a Nobel Prize, his work remains subject to the requirements of the magazine's house style – a phenomenon by no means unique to him. All contributors, famous or not, are required to adhere to the



magazine's stylistic rules. This means *The blow* is edited not only for length: Coetzee's own stylistics are revised to fit the idiosyncrasies of American English (which is neither unusual nor surprising), but also the magazine's own linguistic and stylistic register. In this instance, then, it is possible to see *The New Yorker* not so much as a venue for great writing, which it doubtless is, but as a publication

that requires writers' adherence to a particular stylistic and grammatical ethos as a prerequisite for publication, even in the case of an excerpt from a novel that will imminently appear from a mainstream American publisher in a significantly different form.

Within this context, we might productively think of Coetzee himself (and to a lesser extent *Slow Man* and *The blow*) as a "South African

cultural text" encountering and being mediated by *The New Yorker* – here representative of a highly specific and visible facet of a particular kind of "global mediascape" and a particular kind of localised, metropolitan "print culture" – for a largely, although by no means exclusively, North American audience.

The *New Yorker* was founded in 1925 by Harold Ross. From the beginning, the magazine asserted its refusal to speak to "the old lady" living in Dubuque, Iowa, thus dismissing all that lay outside the metropolitan centre.

In fact, Ross viewed this dismissal as a liberation, a refusal to bow to the expectations of middle America – or what might have been regarded as conformist philistinism.

A few examples of *The New Yorker*'s stylistic changes to Coetzee's text will follow, but first I want to look briefly at the broad strokes of the editor's pen, as well as Coetzee's willingness to modify his text for the format of an excerpt that performs as an autonomous short story.

The *New Yorker* was long interested in Coetzee's work and had intended to publish an excerpt from *Disgrace* in 1999.

For *The blow*, Deborah Treisman, the fiction editor, again worked with Coetzee to produce an excerpt that would function as an autonomous short story (or at least semi-autonomous; its aesthetic and formal success as an organic piece of short fiction is arguable).

Treisman explained in an e-mail exchange that it has been the policy of *The New Yorker* since its founding not to identify excerpts from longer works as such – both, she believes, because the magazine does not want to act as an informal publicity organ for publishing houses, but also because there is an institutional mandate to present short fiction that

appears, whatever its actual status, to be autonomous, rather than a mere foretaste of a longer work.

Treisman made the initial cuts to the excerpted *Slow Man* text then passed them to Coetzee, who, she says, reinstated some deleted lines and suggested removing others. Variations in grammar, spelling and punctuation seem almost certainly to have been made by Treisman or *New Yorker* copy editors to comply with the magazine's house style.

In three cases towards the end of the excerpt, Coetzee provided alternative text to draw *The blow* to a more organic conclusion.

Largely, the editorial interventions in *The blow* eliminate what were regarded as extraneous subplots, or, as Treisman describes them, "red herrings", which alluded to action resolved beyond the confines of the excerpt – for instance, Paul Rayment's encounter with Wayne "Bright or Blight" in the hospital and subsequent references to Blight throughout the first 14 chapters.

Treisman states that the cuts made to the text were intended largely to provide a "structure" that was "satisfying on its own terms". In certain instances, however, the excisions merit closer scrutiny, even given Coetzee's involvement in the editorial process.

The first, compellingly, is the elimination in the magazine text of the line from the first paragraph of the book: "The unusual word limber or limbre is on the horizon too." While the first word, limber, obviously foreshadows Rayment's amputation and his difficulties both with physical and emotional flexibility – implicitly, flexibility "without damage to shape or structure" (OED 1989) – the French-looking limbre is a more complicated word, which deserves unpacking.

First, its presence at the begin-

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ning of the book plants the seed of an expectation of European concerns – thematic as well as formal – both for the character and the novel as a whole. At first glance, the English reader with no knowledge of French might think, simply, "ah, here is a French cognate, a French spelling of 'limber'", but this assumption would be wrong, since the French equivalents are supple or flexible or agile. A little investigation reveals that the only meaning of *limbre* in French is the name of a small village north-west of Poitiers – 564km or so by road from Lourdes, where Rayment spent his childhood, but France nonetheless. (It should also be noted that "limbre" is not a recognised variant spelling of "limber" either as noun, adjective or verb in English.)

The Anglophone reader, and particularly the cosmopolitan, metropolitan-identifying reader of literary fiction, sees limbre and might think she knows it, finding confirmation that the book is literature, that it bothers with the implicitly European. In fact, it is nothing like what one guesses it is. Perhaps, we might now think, Coetzee's French is not so

good, his guess as faulty as our first guess. We should remember Coetzee's statement from *Doubling the Point* that when it comes to learning languages, he has "a poor ear and a distaste for memorising".

Perhaps, though, Coetzee knew exactly the kind of effect limbre would have: misleading, but suggestive of a cultured European – and specifically French – sensibility; for the English text, "limber" is the important word, because of the "limb" embedded within it, while limbre cuts into a rich, if misleading, field of cultural signification and alignment. Moreover, if we assume that the whole of *Slow Man* is effectively a silent narration by Elizabeth Costello, then the error may be doubly intentional: Costello's error; in other words, rather than Coetzee's, or even Costello's intentional error, as conceived by Coetzee.

A comparison of *Slow Man* and *The blow* reveals that the latter systematically eliminates every suggestion of metafictionality, not least the appearances in chapters 13 and 14 of Elizabeth Costello herself, making *The blow* a different creature indeed: a straightforward narrative, a story almost recognisable as an ordinary *New Yorker* short story, a story that does nothing to indicate it is anything other than realist. *The blow* remains knowing in a way that would meet the expectations of the magazine's readers, but the self-knowledge – the story that knows it is a story – has vanished as completely as the French words (and Rayment's leg).

Flanery is a critic and novelist, author of Absolution. This is an edited extract from Limber: The Flexibilities of Post-Nobel Coetzee, which appeared in Print, Text and Book Cultures in South Africa, edited by Andrew van der Vlies. It is published by Wits Press.