

Untold stories recapture a history nearly lost

MAUREEN ISAACSON

THE END of the world was nigh. Enoch Mngijima and his followers, the group called the Israelites, refused to leave their holy village, Ntabelanga (The Mountain of the Rising Sun).

Spiritual values such as they adhered to were trampled upon by the white government. On May 24, 1921, 800 white policemen and soldiers marched to Bulhoek, just outside the Eastern Cape.

The swords, sticks and spears of the holy Israelites stood no chance against the authorities' rifles, machine guns and cannons.

Two hundred Israelites were killed and several wounded in the massacre that was to become the precursor of several others: at Bondelswarts in 1922; Sharpeville in 1960; Langa in 1985; and Boipatong and Bisho, both in 1992.

Mngijima, whose father had brought his family to Bulhoek, a subdistrict of Kamastone, "an African location", was the last born of nine children.

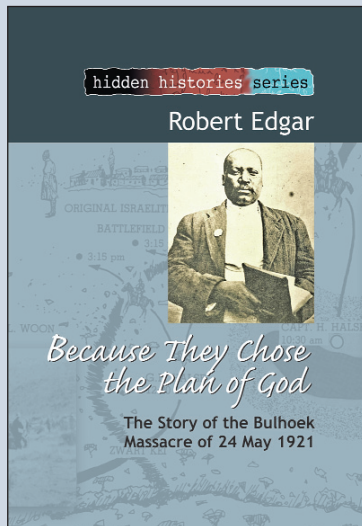
Severe headaches prevented him from following his brothers to Lovedale college; he left school after Grade 5, became a farmer

and a hunter of small game, then an evangelist, well known in his area.

Then came the angel, in April 1907, in a vision and predicted the imminent arrival of war – only those who worshipped God faithfully would be spared. Halley's Comet, which appeared in April 1910, convinced Mngijima that God was angry; the blazing ball in the heavens signalled the need to return to the Old Testament.

He broke away from the Wesleyan Methodist Church, joined the Church of God and Saints of Christ, a small church from the US, led by African Americans, and adopted the ways of the Hebrews. His followers called themselves the Israelites, practised the Ten Commandments and observed Saturday as their Sabbath.

Robert Edgar, a professor of African studies at Howard University in Washington, DC, tells the story of Mngijima in Unisa's *Hidden History* series, in a simple format, which serves as a teaching tool with photographs, yet embraces the complexity of the arguments, for and against the sanity of the prophet, and the various interpretations of the heroism –



or ignorance – of the men and women who stood firm in the face of white power.

Does Edgar believe in visions? He said in an interview that, as a social historian, he reports what he hears about the visions and does not pass judgement. "As an individual I believe there are certain people who hear the call of God and express themselves through prophecies and visions.

I don't doubt the sincerity of his (Mngijima's) beliefs. The government mistook the drawing of the swords by the Israelites, a ceremonial act, as an act of aggression. The government tried a lot of options, sending (an) armed force was the last one... the issue for them was that a people were considered to be squatting on land. Was this a justification for such action? I have tried to put this story, which I first wrote in 1980, into a more contemporary context."

Another prophet who fell prey to a vision that the end of the world was nigh was Nontetha Nkwenkwe, who preached in the area between King William's Town and Middledrift. She famously experienced a vision during the flu pandemic of 1918. Her vision had no message about whites, but it warned that unless her people followed a righteous path they would be punished by God in a prelude to the world's end. With the Bulhoek incident still alive in their memory, the authorities kept a strict eye on her.

With no grounds for arrest, they had her declared insane by a magistrate in King William's Town. She was committed to a

mental institution at Fort Beaufort, 75km from her home.

Her disobedience of the command to refrain from preaching led to her incarceration again, this time in Weskoppies Mental Hospital in Pretoria, where she remained until her death in 1935.

Edgar, who has written primarily about 20th century southern African political and religious history, has co-authored a book, *African Apocalypse: The Story of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, a Twentieth-Century South African Prophet* (Ohio University Press, Swallow Press, 1999) with Hilary Sapire, that details the shocking conditions that Nkwenkwe endured in these mental institutions. Edgar complains that South African historians pay scant attention to religious issues.

The easy access of Unisa's presentation in this series provides a possible vehicle for the myriad remarkable histories that have to be told before they are lost.

● *Because They Chose the Plan of God: The Story of the Bulhoek Massacre of 24 May 1921*, by Robert Edgar (Unisa *Hidden History* series).

**The Mistress's Dog:
Short Stories 1996-2010**
By David Medalie
(Picador Africa)

Making sense of uncertainty

Leon de Kock comments on a collection of stories in which ironies are drawn from social environments

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THE ROUTINE scholarly neglect of South African writers – in terms of any serious attention beyond newspaper reviews, launches, website chatter and book-fair appearances – is such that it comes almost as a shock to see an author ushered into print with a foreword and an afterword by a respected public critic.

This is the case in David Medalie's new collection of short stories, *The Mistress's Dog*, which is bookended by an introductory note and an afterword discussing the shape of current South African writing by Wits professor Michael Titlestad.

At first, this "support structure" may strike one as a little odd.

Do new books of creative writing need critical scaffolding? Does it not detract from the unadorned impact of the writing?

On reflection, I feel that such a reaction is a symptom precisely of internalised neglect.

South African writers, apart from a few celebrated names, have become so used to being ignored that we are startled, and suspicious, when one among us gets given some scholarly due.

Titlestad's critical scaffolding offers value. He suggests, correctly, that Medalie's stories belong to a style that is distinctly modernist, and he places the book within a suggestive contextual reading of the shape of South African writing at the moment.

Medalie's stories, in my reading, present sharply fractured perspectives from within the registering consciousness of single characters. These characters are out of sync with their environment – an

environment that is registered variously in terms of family, community, politics or a circle of love/loyalty/betrayal.

If this is a typically modernist condition, the stories are, at the

same time, far removed from any whiff of postmodernism – they decline to rip out the architectural cladding to expose the plumbing, wiring or understructure of the writing.

In many senses, this is a relief. Medalie is in control of his characters, and his narrative hand is firm. He builds credible fictional illusions through careful and meticulous accumulative development of voice and detail. He does not interrupt this build-up to startle the reader with self-conscious meta-fictional trickery.

In the wake of Koos Prinsloo and the postmodernist turn in South African short story writing following, among others, Jack Cope and Nadine Gordimer's early foundation of social realism, Medalie's stories feel almost out on a limb.

Can people really still be presented in terms of such stable ideas about how they supposedly feel about themselves? Are people really quite this coherent in their self-scripting?

There is, however, a large pay-off



in Medalie's stories for this fictional approach, and that is the articulation of what Titlestad typifies as a "mezzanine" condition. Medalie's characters, like many of us, are suspended between what came before and what is now coming upon us, both of which are anything but certain.

In such a "post-ideological" world (Titlestad's term), where the clear scripting of anti-apartheid struggle, nation-building or TRC-speak has become less decisive and more ambiguous, individual subjects are often suspended in a state of continuing uncertainty.

These are subjects who no longer inhabit a world in which the idea of South Africa is anything more special or interesting than the idea of any other country – we have become part of a transnational world, with all its indistinctness and local-global ("glocal") blur.

Inside the country, on the other hand, migrancy and rapid urban change have transformed the shape and texture of the social fabric. In the midst of this new

unfamiliarity within what used to be familiar, Medalie's characters, mostly white, often cling for dear life to their older versions of self, or they develop near-comic obsessions.

Medalie shows a gently satirical touch in portraying such obsessive quirks. For example, Simon in *Free Range* takes excessive care to safeguard himself from ill-health and the possibility of a criminal attack against his home in Joburg, "crime capital of the world". He installs alarm systems, panic buttons, internal security gates, an electrified fence. He acquires a Rottweiler called Nemesis. Still not satisfied, he buys a gun and learns to shoot.

Soon he finds that he seldom has reason to leave his home, as he can buy his own gym equipment and have his groceries delivered to his door. He joins a neighbourhood watch campaign to have the suburb closed to traffic.

And so it goes, except that, in the midst of this, Simon is unable to banish the most important danger to his life and well-being, which is fear itself. This is the one fact that he cannot see, despite all his obsessions about vigilance.

In story upon story, Medalie delicately draws out ironies such as these as he spins the threads of individual self-fashioning in contrast to the weave of a shifting human and social environment. He does this with skill and subtlety.

Medalie's stories, like the work of other South African writers, deserve to be read and reread, studied and commented upon.

We need the critical scaffolding, to help us realise the shape of the literature – and to guide its reception – as it emerges. It's called custodianship, and writers need it now as much as ever before.

● *Leon de Kock is the former head of the School of Literature and Language Studies at Wits University. He has taken up a chair of English at the University of Stellenbosch.*