Judging New ‘South African’ Fiction in the Transnational Moment

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Abstract
This essay raises the question of whether, in a public sphere which is more transnational than national, the pursuit of ‘South African’ literary historiography in the ‘national’ mould has not become a somewhat pointless task. In view of what appears to be an emigration from the field of ‘South African literature’ among literary scholars, the task of sifting and evaluating every year’s crop of new writing, I argue, has largely fallen to the judges and conveners of literary prizes. The essay looks at this ‘pragmatic’ literary historiography and the standards informing it, and asks the question whether ‘distant reading’ has not now become an inevitability, given the sheer profusion of new work issuing from South African publishers on an annual basis.

The end of ‘South African’ literary historiography?
A few years ago, I asked the question, “Does [English] South African Literature Still Exist?” (2005) in a keynote address for a Wits University colloquium dealing with the contested terrain we used to call ‘South African literature’ (often eliding the crucial qualifier, ‘English’). Whether we can or should still talk about ‘SA English Literature’, and whether it does or should continue to exist is partly the subject of this essay. In the Wits address, I suggested that ‘South African’ literature in English, in the (60s Dennis Brutus) ‘Knuckles Fists Boots’ mode, or in the (70s André Brink) ‘Looking on Darkness’ moment, was dead, and that I was glad of it. In the same way that Es’kia Mphahlele (1959: 199) decried in the late 1950s against the kind of (South African) writing composed at “white heat, everything full of vitriol”, confessing to his exhaustion with it, my reading was that a feeling of ‘enough’ with landlocked, ‘vitriol’ writing had become widespread, even among the adherents of ‘SA Lit’. In its wake, a phenomenon one might call (assuming ‘English’ as implicit) ‘Literature out of South Africa’ – writing
emanating from the country and written after a decisive transnational rupture – had arisen in defiance of, or in a state of indifference to, the codes and conformities of the earlier historical-political emphases in the country’s corpus of writing. This newer writing was no longer necessarily held within the seam of intercultural convergence, no longer always seeking to flatten out the ridge of that seam yet leaving in its wake the mark of that suture.¹ A couple of years later I asked the rhetorical question whether many of us who had previously regarded ourselves as scholars of South African English Literature had not now become, or wanted to become – in the wake of the poststructuralist turn and the death of the author as a revered figure – academic ‘rock stars’ in our own right, more interested in writing in our names on any number of sexy topics (cities, oceanic discourse, jazz, metropolitanisms, whiteness studies, ugly/beautiful aesthetics, self-styling, to name a few) than in the more modest tasks of assessing, describing and evaluating the writings of others demarcated as ‘imaginative SA writers’. I warned, however, that a more broadly cultural imaginary, out of which the newer forms of critical writing necessarily emerged, depended on the continued existence of a literary-imaginative archive, and that if we failed to record and assess the newer writers and their works, even the broader cultural imaginary could well become etiolated (De Kock 2008a).

most part in a kind of nether-space of literary semi-visibility unless they take to the stage and sing like troubadours for people’s entertainment. Dramatists are equally marginal for reasons peculiar to the pedagogies of teaching literature in classrooms.

To the above list, still confined to English SA writers alone, I would now add at least another twenty names, including Rosamund Kendal (2008), Lauren Liebenberg (2008), Lauren Beukes (2008), Futhi Ntshingila (2008), Diale Tlholwe (2008), Chris Marnewick (2008), Jassie Mackenzie (2008), Rozena Maart (2008), Edyth Bulbring (2008), Hamish Hoosen Pillay (2008), Richard Mason (2008), Tracy Farren (2008), Nthikeng Mohlele (2008), Susan Rabie (2008), Sean Badal (2008), and still more. The number of published works of fiction in English by South Africans entered for the M-Net prize in 2009 (that is, published in the course of 2008), comes in at a total of 37. (See Appendix 1.) The great majority of these works were published inside the country by SA publishers (Umuzi, Picador Africa, Kwela, Penguin SA, New Africa Books, Modjaji Books, Shuter and Shooter, UKZN Press, Jacana Media, Human and Rousseau, Jonathan Ball, 30 Degrees South). That’s a lot of new fiction and a considerable amount of publishing entrepreneurship for a single year. Cumulatively, over the years since 2000, the list becomes very long. And this list accounts only for works published inside the country, and that make it through the publishers’ own gatekeeping measures, which are themselves rigorous enough to ensure that just one percent of submitted fiction makes it into print.2 The point should be obvious enough: it has become almost impossible to ‘keep up’ with the newer literature emerging from a reconstituted, formally democratic state, let alone with the writing published by South Africans transnationally, and in Afrikaans and African languages within the country. ‘South African English literature’ has exploded out of its ‘special status’ confines, in which it was nursed by committed local scholars in a regenerative flourish during the 1980s and 1990s; this critical nursing of the literature was largely done so that it could see off the neocolonial metropolitan bias in university teaching hegemonies. As Derek Barker (2007) shows in his account of literary academic discourse in South Africa between 1958 and 2004, this fight for what we called, in English, “South African literature”, was decisively won, and the subject of South African writing came to dominate the space of peer-review journal articles in the English-speaking academy well into the 2000s. (Barker 2007: 170-242; see also Barker’s 76-page statistical appendix.)

Barker’s data synthesis on published academic articles also shows that
a consensual English SA canon, in statistical terms (number of articles published in peer-review journals) accrued around the following authors: JM Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Bessie Head, and Alan Paton (2004: Appendix, 75). Although his account stops at 2004, it is my impression that detailed stocktaking of the newer work has largely tailed off, despite work by scholars such as Michael Titlestad, Mike Kissack, Sarah Nuttall, Michael Chapman, Meg Samuelson, Dorothy Driver, Rita Barnard and others. What was once a critical industry which prided itself on the recovery of ‘lost’ or neglected work, and which often resorted to large-scale and detailed histories, now tends to draw out themes and append individual works to such themes (cities, metropolitanisms, and oceanic themes being particularly prevalent currently). The earlier imperative of a critical and empirical recapturing of literary artefacts that had been neglected, or which were emergent but invisible as a result of critical bias, appears to have waned significantly. In addition, the impetus to anthologise, record, and publish the elements in the field, keeping up to date with emerging work, seems less marked now than before. Perhaps this falling off has something to do with the rise of ‘theory’ in the SA literary academy from the early 1980s onwards – poststructuralist, postcolonial, postmodern, cultural studies (see Barker 2007: 34; 53-5), and now transnational theory, and perhaps it was generally felt that the territory had been secured. ‘South African [English] Literature’ as a field of study had been achieved: SA works were being taught at universities, both at home and abroad, and we would soon have not one, but two Nobel prizewinners among our writers.

Theory and cultural studies, then, gradually began to assume a greater profile, sexier, no doubt, than cleaning up and annotating old manuscripts. In addition, what is now often referred to as the “transnational turn” ushered in a much bigger world. Before this historical moment, progressive South African scholars, radically nationalist by persuasion (in contrast to Afrikaner Nationalists, they inclined towards a more inclusive, ANC-inspired nationalism) had tended strongly to resist metropolitan critical agendas, imposed from a hierarchical ‘centre’ upon an allegedly backwater ‘periphery’. But now the world had begun to flatten out laterally; national boundaries suddenly became superfluous in the wake of economic and technological flows uniting people within global networks. The Berlin Wall had come down, ‘East’ and ‘West’ were old news, apartheid had collapsed, and South Africa began to see beyond the cultural boycott. In literary-cultural pursuits the desire was to step beyond the enclosure of the ‘national’, the cultural-
boycott hothouse, the ‘struggle’ terrain. That this new horizon was distinctly transnational, in many different ways and directions, was convincingly argued by Hofmeyr and Gunner (2005: 1-8), among others, while Hofmeyr’s work on the circulation of texts across borders and boundaries demonstrated the transnational turn in its historical manner of accounting for cultural change over time (2004). What we might now call the transnational rupture in both literary-critical and imaginative writing coming out of South Africa from the early 1990s onwards was both centrifugal and centripetal, both a category-implosion as well as an outwardly liberating thrust.

**The space of the transnational**

We may consider the salience of this transnational phenomenon. In her essay, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere”, Nancy Fraser (2007[2002]), reviewing public-sphere theory in the wake of Jürgen Habermas’s contributions in this field, writes that developments which were gathering pace in the early 1990s “problematize public sphere theory’s presupposition of a national literature, which was supposed to constitute a medium for the formation of a solidarity national identity” (11). She continues:

> Consider the increased salience of cultural hybridity and hybridization, including the rise of ‘world literature’. Consider also the rise of global mass entertainment, whether straightforwardly American or merely American-like or American-izing. Consider finally the spectacular rise of visual culture, or better, of the enhanced salience of the visual within culture, and the relative decline of print, the literary, etc. In all these ways, it is difficult to accord conceptual primacy to the sort of (national) literary cultural formation seen by Habermas (and by Benedict Anderson) as underpinning the subjective stance of public-sphere interlocutors. On the contrary, insofar as public spheres require the cultural support of a national identity, rooted in national literary culture, it is hard to see them functioning effectively today absent from such solidarity bases. (11-12)

Fraser makes the following useful conclusion:

> In general, then, public spheres are increasingly transnational or postnational with respect to each of the constitutive elements of public opinion. The who of communication, previously theorized as a Westphalian-national citizenry, is now a collection of dispersed subjects of communication. The what of communication, previously theorized as a Westphalian-national interest rooted in a Westphalian-national economy, now stretches across vast reaches of the globe, in a transnational community of fate and of risk, which is not however
reflected in concomitantly expansive solidarities and identities. The
where of communication, once theorized as the Westphalian-national
territory, is now deterritorialized cyberspace. The how of communication,
one theorized as Westphalian-national print media, now encompasses
a vast translinguistic nexus of disjoint and overlapping visual cultures.
Finally, the addressee of communication, once theorized as Westphalian
state power to be made answerable to public opinion, is now an
amorphous mix of public and private transnational powers (suggestively
named “the nebuleuse” by Robert Cox), that is neither easily identifiable
nor rendered accountable. (13)

It was in such a globally dispersed and differently conceived public sphere
that Antjie Krog’s phenomenally successful book, Country of my Skull
(1998), found its purchase as a story of affect and suffering under criminally
oppressive national regimes, touching people who, across the globe, could
relate to precisely such a condition within a postnational conception of “fate
and risk” across the globe. The book was read in South Africa, in Israel, in
Iraq, in Zimbabwe, in Pakistan; in pockets of ugly nationalist enclosure
where leaders were ignoring the newer world-ethical imperative to open up
rather than close down spaces of human mobility and the freedom to choose
from a postnational, rather than a national menu of options for subjectivity
and identity.

This transnationalising public sphere, Anthea Garman reminds us, relying
on Warner (2002), Randeria (2007) and Nash (2007), consists of “reflexive
modern subjects”, people who “identify as fellow humans across national
boundaries and who use transnational public spheres to crystallise the
salience of events and issues with which to become involved” (2008: 9).
Garman, in her work on Krog as a public intellectual, identifies certain key
factors that appear to have coalesced in the shaping of a new transnational
reading subject within a global-local nexus, amounting to a reconstituted
audience for a formerly hermetic Afrikaans poet:

I theorise that a confluence of a global issue (dealing with the past via
truth commissions and harnessing confession), a global publishing
context (with a heightened demand for the publication and consumption
of life narratives), and the work of a local writer with a particular public
record of excellent literary output and political action, enabled a fit
which resulted in Krog coming to prominence on a world stage. (2008:
1)

This circumstantial and historical nexus made possible the public expression,
and globally reconfigured publics’ hearing of Krog’s voice as oracular, as
representative, as witness, given to the expression of her own and others’ enunciatory rights – according to Homi Bhabha (cited by Garman 2008: 6) “not just a right to speak but also a right to proclaim and therefore make claims” (6) in a world, for Bhabha, of “jurisdictional unsettlement” – a scene, Garman adds in paraphrase, in which the settled ideas of nation and nationality are being rendered increasingly complex (6). This is a world, Bhabha suggests, in which the “great social movements of our times – diasporic, refugee, migrant” – have brought about the “right to narrate” (Garman 2008:6); hence the worldwide appetite for life narratives, for memoirs and acts of witness, expressions of pain and suffering, resolve and survival, that cut across the narrower interests and manipulations of polities and nation states.

If this was true of a newer world order emerging decisively from the post-Cold War era, how much truer might it not have been for a South African citizenry only just emerging from decades of world-pariah status, hungry for reconnection with global developments, global entertainment, and the new, alluring mesh of global connectivity. As the ranks of the transnational, ‘reflexive modern subjects’ swelled, and the world transformed from multinational to transnational, getting smaller and more connected in the process, so the special status of apartheid and South Africa as a political ‘hotspot’ diminished. For the newer generation of South Africans born in the 1980s, or for those born in the 1990s, ‘apartheid’ would increasingly now become a refrain in the mouths of their parents and the pages of their school history books. Into the 2000s, writers were emerging who had little recall of formal apartheid as a lived experience. When I interviewed the young novelist Henrietta Rose-Innes in 2005 about her novel, The Rock Alphabet, she stated that known South African ‘history’ was often inaccessible to her characters and, by implication, to people now growing up in South Africa. She added:

It’s a mysterious thing and they cannot decipher it. And it is often unrelated to their [own] stories that have happened on the same landscape ... The novel is partly about confronting the fact that history and what happened in the past does not necessarily have an explanation. It cannot be solved. (De Kock 2005)

In that piece, I wrote that Rose-Innes wanted to show it was possible to live outside the straitjackets of identity as historically conceived in South Africa, and to feel freer in one’s choice of the language one speaks, literally and figuratively, than ever before. This movement is given ironic form by the
resolution of Rose-Innes’s novel. Whereas the new language of the ungovernable brothers in *The Rock Alphabet’s* story, and the older languages of the past – such as contained in the museum collections evoked in the novel – are not exactly conjoined, the load of pre-given, already-known meaning, is lightened and made ironic.

Such a ‘lightening’ effect, as well as the ironising dimensions, I would argue, is evident in what we might call, following Loren Kruger’s useful phrase “post-anti-apartheid” (2002:35), South African writing in the transnational turn, not only in English. And yet this writing – exemplified most prominently by fiction – awaits a sustained project of critical stocktaking, or even sustained and serious attention apart from occasional reviews, critical articles and encyclopaedic essays.4 One might make the argument that in a global or transnational public sphere which disavows the ‘national’ as an entity for the purposes of self-identification, the newer, ‘reflexive modern subjects’ of this meta-national order have little use for refigured ‘national’ literary histories. Not only has the more recent writing decisively loosened itself from ‘South African history’ and the ‘struggle’, in all its manifestations, it has also hungrily embraced a larger membership of ‘world’ literature. In such a category of literature, surely the category ‘South African literature’ has become redundant?

My own answer to this question would be, yes and no. Yes, for all the reasons set out above. No, because my sense is that the ‘trans’ in ‘transnational’ creates a cusp between the national and what lies beyond it, not a severance. I would argue that, in the two best novels of 2008 written by South African citizens in English – Anne Landsman’s *The Rowing Lesson* and Michiel Heyns’s *Bodies Politic* – it is precisely the transnational cusp, and the way this bi- or multi-directional conjunction plays out in their novels, that makes them especially interesting for us, now. (The same might be said for the best novel in 2008 in Afrikaans, Etienne van Heerden’s *30 Nagte in Amsterdam.*)5 The novel that was adjudged to be the best written by a South African citizen (again, by the 2008 M-Net English fiction prize judges)6 in 2007, was J M Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). At a public discussion at the 2008 Cape Town Book Fair on the morning following the award of the prize, I asked M-Net fiction-prize judge Michael Titlestad whether the award of the prize to a writer no longer living in South Africa, and no longer (in the main) writing about South Africa – in *Diary of a Bad Year*, at least – had not presented the judges with a conundrum. Titlestad said that the matter had indeed been deliberated at length by the judges, before the award of the prize
and that the following critical consensus had emerged:

‘South African’ writers, who in the past were often diasporic in the sense of living in forced exile, were now even more frequently diasporic in a migratory (rather than a politically exilic) sense; this was so much so that it no longer made sense to define the category ‘South African’ with primary reference to geographical territory as a fixed category, or in a dualistic home-exile conjunction. (Indeed, those who work as writers from abroad frequently return and then leave again, only to return again intermittently as – economic and other – circumstances permit, setting up cyclical migration paths perhaps; they tend to do relatively short visits, or write in sessions, here and there, such as Eben Venter writing now in Prince Albert, Karoo, now in Melbourne, Australia.) So, apart from Coetzee, any number of South African writers either write from within a range of transnational sites – Anne Landsman (New York), Marita van der Vyver (France), Breyten Breytenbach (Paris), Elleke Boehmer (Oxford), Athol Fugard (US), Justin Cartwright (UK), Joanne Fedler (Sydney), Zakes Mda (Ohio), to name a few, while Koos Kombuis does ‘London Pub’ tours to play to various constituencies of South Africans, both Afrikaners and others, in the UK ‘diaspora’ – and the M-Net competition rules helpfully demarcate the prize on the grounds of South African citizenship, not residence in the country.

My question to Titlestad, though, was also about the subject-matter of Diary of a Bad Year. Although Señor C, the Coetzee-lookalike author-persona in this novel, is a 72-year-old South African émigré writer living in Australia, he has relatively little to say about his former home country. Titlestad’s answer was that migrant writing would necessarily yield migrant, or migrating, themes. ‘South Africa’ could no longer be contained. Yes, I felt, that is the feel of so much of the ‘new’ writing. And yet the link is there in Diary of a Bad Year, as it is in many other transnational works: Señor C remains an émigré South African writer and this surely informs his points of view, despite their now being triangulated by meta-national, multivectoral connections. Witness Señor C’s opening essay on the unpalatable nature of ‘democracy’, how unfree its supposedly ‘free’ choice actually is, or feels. Such indirect comment ‘on’ South African post-anti-apartheid politics is present in Heyns’s Bodies Politic, too, as well as in other, more recent works written in the wake of the transnational turn.

So I would argue that the category ‘South African’ as a marker of a literary field remains important, even necessary for a sense of history and determination in what one might call a ‘national imaginary’, but that the
space of the ‘national’ has irrevocably entered into the fluid waters of ‘trans’, the transitive cusp of crossing and recrossing, of absorbing the fictional self into (now easier, more fluid) spaces of related elsewhere, and of absorbing the otherness of such elsewhere into the fictional self. To ‘write up’ such a transnational history is an even more daunting task than writing up the older ‘national’ literary history was. Even that task was frequently acknowledged to be quixotic (see the essays in Smit, Wade and Van Wyk 1996). The need to limit one’s brief to smaller stories, or larger patterns, within the acknowledged sense of a postnational configuration – indeed now a transnational constellation – strikes me as more pressing under contemporary circumstances.

The pragmatic historiography of literary prizes

Such philosophical considerations do not prevent a more pragmatic form of historiography from occurring year in and year out in the workings of various major literary prizes. For the purposes of this essay, I want to confine myself to the M-Net Prize, since I acted as one of three judges for the 2009 prize, awarded for the best work of fiction published by a South African citizen (including dual citizenship) in the calendar year 2008. In the absence of anything in the way of significant critical reception of new works of writing by South African authors in the popular SA media, and in the absence of up-to-date general literary stocktaking, prizes such as the M-Net award have come to occupy the space of critical reception in that they demarcate a field (here, a sub-field, ‘fiction’) by citizenship, genre and year of publication: they compile a list of works submitted by publishers (see Appendix 1), and generate critical description and evaluation of the works by engaging scholars to do this work. Although the list and the critical descriptions/evaluations so generated are seldom published, these literary-critical effects are circulated among judges and so a record is established. It says a great deal about the state of critical reception that, for a researcher of emerging writing, such lists and records are the most accessible way to delimit the field and to get a comprehensive list of the datum of what has been published (in this case, in the genre of fiction, although the UJ [University of Johannesburg] Prize includes poetry and nonfiction). For a researcher into current writing, one way of establishing greater comprehensiveness is to approach the prize conveners and ask for their initial lists – Dr Ronit Frenkel of UJ’s English department (UJ English prize), Hettie Scholtz (M-Net Prize), and the books editor of the Sunday Times for the Sunday Times-Alan Paton Literary Award.
(Tymon Smith). The *Sunday Times* also publishes what it calls its “longlist” (all the works submitted) prior to awarding the prize.

In the absence of much in the way of a regular and consistent programme of literary stocktaking by the academy, the work of recording ‘South African literature’ has fallen to the prize conveners, themselves directed by the media giants (Avusa Media, publisher of the *Sunday Times*, Multichoice, owner of M-Net); or directed by universities or cultural institutions, where the capital sources are possibly more mediated, but where marketing remains a prime motivation for doing awards. There is nothing new about capital acting as patron to the arts, but it remains an irony, given the historical preoccupation of literary criticism in South Africa with the depredations of capitalism, the pernicious conjunctions of class and race, and the critiques of self-deluding cultural states of innocence such as “Butlerism” (see Kirkwood 1976): that is, the mistaken conception that English-speaking South Africans were innocently buffered between two nasty nationalisms, Boer versus Black. How things have changed! Certainly, the entrepreneurs and money-makers now continue to leverage the symbolic capital of ‘culture’ and ‘literature’ by front-ending their business with the finesse of literary appreciation, but it is ironic that the critics, the radical questioners and campaigners for cultural revolution, have left the field to what they would earlier have typified as the vultures of capital-accumulation. For a critic or a reader trying to make sense of the country’s writing in a way that is complete and thorough, the scholarly journals (whether of a radical persuasion or not) will not help all that much. Neither will the under- and postgraduate courses at universities, which to a great extent have ditched the demarcated field of ‘South African’ writing in favour of much sexier hold-alls like postcoloniality, transnationalism, global contrapuntalism, diasporic literature, self-styling, public culture, the practice of everyday life, improvisational practice, the end of theory, the body (both dead and alive), cities, topographies, keywords, you name it.

The initial list compiled by convenors of prizes at least covers the field, year by year. The judges’ shortlist — at least in the case of the M-Net Prize — is the result of lengthy deliberation among the judges, both over email and in session. The judges make concise notes on the shortlist, which they are required to write up and deliver. (See Appendix 2.) Researchers might ask for the brief commendation statements prepared for the announcement of the shortlisted works prior to the announcement of the overall winner, and the citation of the winner. These critical nuggets — derived from literary and
cultural critics drawn from both the academy and the more general public sphere – are a starting point, something to take issue with or follow up. The judges, after all, have taken the trouble, over several months of sustained reading, to reflect on the value and stature of individual works within a grouping of related writing.

Such acts of public critical deliberation do not happen in any systematic way unless they are convened, and the institutions convening a public consideration of literature in a year-by-year, exhaustive manner, are mainly outside of the academy though drawing in figures both from within the academy and without. This is being done in pursuit of an explicitly evaluative outcome: to decide which work is the best, and which four (or two, in some cases) are to be deemed as runners-up. In a field of about 40 works, all five shortlisted works for the M-Net Prize, or three for the UJ Prize, must be regarded as ‘winners’ distinguished from the rest as distinctly a cut above the average. This raises questions of evaluation as against critical coverage, the possible absence of ‘thick’ literary and cultural description, canon-formation, and selective reception, but since the prize-culture and to some extent the ‘festival’ culture (also back-end supported by the capitalists for their own front-end purposes) are the most significant sites of comprehensive literary reckoning left, we may as well take what we can from the bonanza-version of literary appreciation.

**Methodologies of judging**
What are the methodologies of judging literary prizes? What standards inform the value judgments made in the course of determining a shortlist and an overall winner? What standards do the judges use to make their calls on which works are better, and which worse, than others? In some senses, the prize-culture creates the conditions for a refreshingly no-nonsense form of reckoning. In both the prizes in which I was involved in 2009, areas of consensus emerged in the initial shortlists (almost every judge across both prizes shortlisted Damon Galgut’s *The Impostor* and Michiel Heyns’s *Bodies Politic*, and there was implicit consensus about the literary value of works such as Anne Landsman’s *The Rowing Lesson*, Chris Marnewick’s *Shepherds and Butchers*, and Peter Harris’s *In a Different Time*. Equally, there was implicit consensus around the absence from both shortlists of works that might have been expected to feature, such as Mandla Langa’s *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* (which won a Commonwealth literary prize) although Langa was excluded from the M-Net Prize reckoning because he was an executive within the Multichoice corporate structure; and Michael
Cawood Green’s *For the Sake of Silence*, which might also have been expected to feature. Such areas of consensus among a diverse judging group would seem to suggest that literary reckoning – in the evaluative sense – is not quite so wayward as one might have expected; that there must indeed be underlying operative methodologies of evaluation.

Indeed, the responses that I solicited from the judges of both prizes (in the English category) to the question, what were your values and your implicit methodologies of judging the literary works submitted to you, revealed a distinct trend-line. I asked several judges, on email, to provide, “off the top of [their] heads”, a “brief summary of the implicit literary values and the implicit critical methodology [you] employ when making [your] calls for the [prize] shortlist”. I wanted ‘top-of-head’ reflex responses, since I believe these are the operative as opposed to the constative literary criteria. I believe, nonetheless, that the judges who did respond would have retained their core criteria had they been given 10 days and 10 pages in which to respond.

Karen Scherzinger, Professor and Chair of English at the University of Johannesburg, replied with the opening statement that in judging the UJ Prize, she worked on the premise that award-winners should represent excellence in Literature with a capital ‘L’, as Fay Weldon unapologetically puts it, in *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*. The questions I keep in mind when I am reading the submissions are: could I teach this novel (or poem, or memoir, or whatever else it might be) to my university-level students? Does it have the complexity, ambiguity, and metaphorical originality and richness that could sustain a series of lectures? Is this the kind of text on which I might be inspired to write an academic article? So I suppose what I am looking for is that strange creature, a text of literary and academic merit – although it is almost impossible for me to articulate precisely what those terms mean, especially in the space of one paragraph. I’m not looking for a text that is ‘popular’ so much as one that is *challenging*. That said, the “sjoe” factor is a real one – especially in the debut category, where we are given the opportunity simply to applaud energy, enthusiasm and courage, without dwelling too much on a submission’s level of High Seriousness.

Craig Mackenzie, Professor and former Chair of English at UJ, had the following to say:

I have thought quite a lot about this (having had to read something like 250 texts in the last two and a half years for various literary prizes). I
don’t believe I have anything particularly in mind when approaching a batch of reading, but look out for readability; a compelling narrative thread; an unusual angle; humour; incisiveness; unpredictability; clean, accomplished language. The feeling I have when reading any text is: why should I go on reading? Is there not something better for me to read (given that only so many books can be read in a lifetime)? Things that put me off completely are shoddily written, predictable texts, or those that require a great deal from their reader without yielding any reward.

David Medalie, Professor of English at the University of Pretoria and a writer of (South African) fiction himself, commented in these terms:

I would need to give this more thought, but one thing that comes immediately to mind is the quality of the language. No matter what the subject-matter, a winning entry would, for me, need to be linguistically impressive. I am drawn to works which are linguistically ambitious, but which do not reach too far or show signs of strain; there must also be delicacy, restraint and understatement to offset the richness of the language and to show that the writer is fully in control of his or her material. This may be too self-evident or banal to be of much use to you, but I offer it for what it’s worth.

Jane Rosenthal, novelist and critic, gave the following account:

In previous years I had a little system in which I rated each book on a five-point scale in categories such as strength of characters, plot, themes, structure and quality of writing. This worked reasonably well to help get some sort of steadiness of assessment into the process, but it was rather tedious. This year I decided to just read headlong through each novel and see what I thought at the end of it. Some novels I abandoned after a few pages as they were conspicuously not going to make a short or even a long list. The criteria which would ensure that a book was actually read to the end would include one or all of these: originality (of ideas, language, character); complexity (the author’s ability to embrace many strands and ideas); subtle grasp of character; a sustained emotional tone or tones; suspense (the reader should have some strong desire to know how the novel turns out); high level of language sophistication in use of specific idiom, clever dialogue, metaphor, rhythm – a perfection of style (which could be dense and cluttered or simple and clear); seriousness of themes.

My own top-of-the-head response (and the one I used in the M-Net judging deliberations) is the following:

In the judging, I singled out the following factors: 1) readability score;
2) moral, ethical and philosophical acuity or vision in the thematics of the work; and 3) the deeper intelligence of form in the work, or the implicit, second-order intelligence that resides not only in the work’s thematic content, but also in its structuration. In valuing these categories, I took into consideration the extent to which the works were in keeping with what I regarded as the contemporary conditions of (South African) writing, best summed up as transnational as well as post-anti-apartheid, and the extent to which the work was polyphonic, of the multivocality of the work.8

I did not ask the judges to frame their responses within a consideration of the category ‘South African fiction’ or ‘South African writing’. It is nevertheless striking that these responses – which I believe to be a mark of maturity in the SA academy in terms of their formal sophistication – seem almost uniformly to eschew, at the primary level of formulation, criteria that relate specifically to the ‘national’ question, or the ‘political’, or class and race factors. The quoted critics decidedly do have opinions on these matters, and their top-of-head responses were framed by a general and deliberately undifferentiated question. I find it to be valuable critical and historiographic data that the critics’ first enunciations on literary value suggest a move towards what I tentatively call a more internationalist formalism, a preoccupation with the textures of textuality, in preference to earlier forms of ‘engaged’ or ‘sociological’ critical criteria in the academy. I am largely in agreement with the various strands of criteria given by the judges quoted above. I believe that such evaluative standards based on what I would call the formal, operational dynamics of writing are good, and necessary, for the formal judging and ranking of fiction. My bigger point is that South African exceptionalism (as Mahmood Mamdani (1996: 27) pointed out a while ago in relation to political history) has worn away to almost nothing. Surely it is astonishing that in judging South African literary prizes in the year 2009 the judges’ criteria seem largely indistinguishable in the final analysis from criteria used to judge the Man-Booker or any other world literary prize?

Whether this is a good or a bad thing is a different debate. For the moment the point I would like to make is that the geographical collocation of works under the moniker ‘South African’ appears to have become little more than incidental. Certainly, the sponsors of the prizes are likely (in some instances, perhaps not all) to market their validation of literature with money and honour under the mantle of a South African nationalism (largely idealistic in the rainbow-mould, calling on notions of national belonging), but for the
judges, the works were judged as literature. Or, let us say, primarily as literature, and only then as ‘South African literature’. As Scherzinger puts it, literature “with a capital L”. To this, many would say, bravo! At last, ‘we’ have come of age. ‘We’ have joined the rest of the world. In a relentlessly transnationalising, globalised world, there is no other option. Not only has “our” literature broken the bounds of national exceptionalism, but this is desirable and inevitable. The case for this argument is suggested by the pattern of validation in the very best Afrikaans writing: publication in Afrikaans within the country, followed by international publication in translation. For these Afrikaans authors, such as Andrè Brink, Marlene van Niekerk, Eben Venter, Deon Meyer and Etienne van Heerden, writing is an expansionary thrust from committedly located identity into a transnational reading public. International publication in English is a vital, second life of literature for them, an extension of their beings as writers, not to mention an extension of their reading publics and their potential sales.

Conclusion: distant reading as a practice for ‘South African’ fiction?
Franco Moretti scandalised the literary academy in 2000 by proposing what he called “distant reading”, in defiance of the US tradition of “close reading”. Moretti was looking for a way of doing what the comparatists call “world literature”, and he made a compelling point: the more texts you study, the greater the distance from the text. The “trouble with close reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction),” he wrote, is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon. This may have become an unconscious and invisible premise by now, but it is an iron one nonetheless: you invest so much in individual texts only if you think that very few of them really matter. Otherwise, it doesn’t make sense. And if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course, world literature will do so: it would be absurd if it didn’t!) close reading will not do it. It’s not designed to do it, it’s designed to do the opposite. (2000: 57)

Close reading, Moretti argued, was really a “theological exercise”, what he describes as “very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously”. What was really needed, he wrote, was “a little pact with the devil”:

[W]e know how to read texts, now let’s learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems.
And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it’s precisely this ‘poverty’ that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know. This is why less is actually more. (57-8)

Moretti is arguing for a way of describing large units of ‘literature’ within the quixotic quest to write a ‘world’ literary history. World literature, he writes, “is not an object, it’s a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts” (55). Reading Moretti’s controversial essay, the question arises: is what we call ‘South African literature’ massifying and transnationalising to such an extent, and so diversifying in theme and content, that it is a ‘problem’ rather than an object, and it requires ‘distant reading’? To some extent, this has always been the case – witness the fact that Stephen Gray’s landmark Southern African Literature: An Introduction (1979) was itself an act of ‘distant reading’, a drawing out of what Moretti calls “devices, themes, tropes” from a vast range of works. A similar argument might be made of Michael Chapman’s Southern African Literatures (2003[1996]) – indeed, the differential between inclusion and exclusion of individual works as against shapes and motifs in the literature as a whole was at the core of that book’s contested critical reception. If distant reading has been a precondition for writing SA literary history, might it not be true of current literary production, which appears to have outstripped the bounds of detailed critical stocktaking? An example of practice, or a case in point, is this very essay. I have already outrun my allocation of space, not to mention reader-patience, in the (necessary) conceptual exercise of setting out the ‘problem’. So, instead, I propose to place, with some abbreviation, the notes I and my two fellow judges made on our shortlists, at the request of the convener of the M-Net Prize, Hettie Scholtz, in an appendix. (Appendix 2.) These notes represent a kind of distant reading, a categorisation and identification of what we might call devices, themes, tropes. They offer a guide to what three judges found to be the best writing published in 2008, and they explain, to some extent, what those works are about. Scholars, teachers and researchers who wish to zoom in on some of the works can then possibly use these notes as point of departure, combining distant reading with exercises in close reading. Certainly, more detailed critical work on the five works on the M-Net shortlist
would be welcome, and helpful to an understanding of what interests ‘South African’ writers working in the transnational world.

I place the term ‘South African’ within scare quotes partly because in the case of Michiel Heyns’s *Bodies Politic*, which ended up on the shortlists of both the UJ and the M-Net prizes, and which nearly won both prizes, it requires a stretch of the imagination to call the novel ‘South African’ in any but an indirect sense. The story takes place in England, and deals with the suffragette movement in the early 20th century, particularly with the lives of the Pankhurst family. Faced with this situation, a critic can argue for the relevance of themes in the supposedly ‘non South African’ work for the ‘South African’ case (as I did in the M-Net deliberations, saying that the subordination of the personal body and the affective realm to the *body politie*, as occurs in Heyns’s novel, is a potent theme in the era of Jacob Zuma); or argue that ‘South African’ content is a red herring: ‘South African’ authors are increasingly competing for readership in a world market, and within the general category of ‘world literature’. One can argue for both: if one sees the first option as centripetal, and the second as centrifugal, then surely both are apt? Surely centripetal as well as centrifugal forces are characteristic of the transnational rupture? It is however only possible to take the inward-bound view via a practice of distant reading. Only through a distillation of themes and a cognitive process of analogy and pattern-recognition10 can one make the case for the relevance of Heyns’s *Bodies Politic* to a ‘South African’ situation, polity or thematic field. Close reading will not do it.

My larger point remains the following: who, apart from the M-Net judges, and the judges of the other big prizes, is conducting a critical audit of everything written by South African writers in every given year, and rating/evaluating it as well as making notes on it? Those who are looking at recent work inevitably do it selectively, according to Moretti’s devices, themes, tropes (see endnote 2). Generally, the thinking of the various judges, and their notes, remain unpublished. For as long as I am a judge, I shall endeavour to write up the process for publication on a yearly basis. But I could be replaced as a judge at the whim of the conveners. Does it matter? If, as Moretti argues, you want to look beyond the canon, close reading will not do the job. And if there is one rupture that appears to be decisive, it is the breakout from (South African) canon-formation into wider spheres of interest, the most recent of which appears to be the thematics of oceanic links and a critical epistemology that abrogates terrestrial limits. Along with the

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widespread distaste for the category ‘national’ in the current critical climate, the desire to enter into a literary-critical world cast within a decisively transnational mould would appear to seal the coffin of ‘South African literature’ as a contained and readable category. What we increasingly have, I would suggest, is a ‘problem’ rather than a ‘literature’, and that problem remains, how do we best read the writing by and among South Africans, wherever they are, in the context of, and in relation to, the much larger world to which we have finally become integral. Writers’ nationality has now become of secondary interest only. World issues predominate: the local is of interest only as it infuses global matters of concern with a critically located inflection. Location/locatedness remains crucial, but only to the extent that it connects, or the extent to which it is ‘glocal’, as the saying goes. There may well be a subsidiary ‘South African’ reading market, represented by SA publishers and readers, but the critics have largely jumped ship. So, if ‘South African literature’ is adrift, so to speak, then it may not necessarily be such a bad thing.

Notes
1. This argument is drawn from “South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction” (De Kock 2001; 2004).
2. See “How to Get into Bed with a Publisher”, Sunday Times Lifestyle (De Kock 2008b), in which this figure is deduced from statistics given by South African publishers at a colloquium with publishers (Wits University, 2008).
3. See Nuttall’s Entanglement (2009), and work by Barnard as well as Titlestad (along with others) in the forthcoming Cambridge History of South African Literature, currently in preparation under the editorship of Derek Attridge and David Attwell. Samuelson’s overview in English Studies in Africa (Samuelson 2008) is helpful and detailed. See also Chapman and others in this issue of Current Writing.
4. The forthcoming Cambridge History of South African Literature (ed. Attridge and Attwell) will go some way towards redressing this state of affairs, but only some way, as it is organised along broad thematic lines, in over 30 thematic essays. In addition, at a planning colloquium in preparation for the individual essays at Wits in 2008, the editors (Attwell particularly) urged writers to imagine they were writing for an audience conceived of transnationally, with little prior knowledge of the field. Writers were urged to let go of the ‘internal’ or older, national disagreements and controversies in SA criticism. These are a market-driven considerations, which are revealing of the imperative to recast histories of literature in a transnational rather than a national mould.
5. Best as judged by the prestigious M-Net Fiction Prize, of which I was one of
three judges for the English category. Landsman’s novel won the prize, while Heyns was a close second. (Van Heerden’s 30 Nagte in Amsterdam won both the 2009 UJ Prize and the 2009 M-Net Prize for Afrikaans fiction.)

6. A panel of judges on which I did not sit. The judges for that panel were Michael Titlestad, Imraan Coovadia and Jane Rosenthal.

7. For example, the M-Net Prize for Fiction, The UJ Prize, the Sunday Times-Alan Paton Literary Award, among others.

8. In my argument at the final deliberative session to determine the overall winner of the M-Net Prize, I argued that the polyphonic aspect of the South African literary condition—the need to speak to and across various forms of otherness, now enlarged by a bigger and even more populated canvas, and also more intra-diverse (in terms of class as well as other variables such as race, sexual politics and new cosmopolitanisms)—had remained more or less current from the earliest of times in the life of the polity called ‘South Africa’ and its colonial predecessors until the present moment.

9. See, for example, Amie Coetzee (1996); Helize van Vuuren (1997); Michael Green (1996); and Henne van Coller (2008).

10. Such as I argued for at a 2006 gathering of global literary historiographers in Stockholm, which resulted in the book Studying Transcultural History (De Kock 2006).

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**APPENDIX 1: List of Fictional Works Published in 2008, and Submitted to M-Net Prize for Award in 2009 in English category**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Publishing House</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Whiplash</td>
<td>Tracey Carmen Farren</td>
<td>Modjati Books</td>
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<td>2. Soilloguy</td>
<td>Stephen M Finn</td>
<td>New Africa Books</td>
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<td>3. The Writing Circle</td>
<td>Rozena Maart</td>
<td>Shuter &amp; Shooter Publishers</td>
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<td>4. Random Violence</td>
<td>Jassy Mackenzie</td>
<td>Umuzi (Random House Struik)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. For the Sake of Silence</td>
<td>Michael Cawood Green</td>
<td>Umuzi (Random House Struik)</td>
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<td>6. The Fall of the Black-eyed Night</td>
<td>Sean Badal</td>
<td>Umuzi (Random House Struik)</td>
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<td>7. Shameless</td>
<td>Futhi Nishingila</td>
<td>Univ of KwaZulu-Natal Press</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Magenta</td>
<td>Denis Patrick Beckett</td>
<td>Univ of KwaZulu-Natal Press</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Things without a Name</td>
<td>Joanne Fedler</td>
<td>Jacana Media</td>
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<td>10. Moxylad</td>
<td>Lauren Beukes</td>
<td>Jacana Media</td>
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<td>11. My Brother’s Book</td>
<td>Jo-Anne Richards</td>
<td>Picador Media</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. The Lost Colours of the Chameleon</td>
<td>Mandla Langa</td>
<td>Picador Media</td>
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<td>13. Karma Suture</td>
<td>Rosamund Kendal</td>
<td>Jacana Media</td>
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<td>14. Till We Can Keep an Animal</td>
<td>Megan Voysey-Braig</td>
<td>Jacana Media</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. The Impostor</td>
<td>Damon Galgut</td>
<td>Penguin Books</td>
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<td>17. The Wading</td>
<td>Tom Eaton</td>
<td>Penguin Books</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Payback</td>
<td>Mike Nicol</td>
<td>Umuzi (Random House Struik)</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Shepherds &amp; Butchers</td>
<td>Chris Marnewick</td>
<td>Umuzi (Random House Struik)</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. My Life with the Duvals</td>
<td>Tim Kcegan</td>
<td>Umuzi (Random House Struik)</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. The Scent of Bliss</td>
<td>Nthikeng Secule Mohlele</td>
<td>Kwela Books (NB Publishers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. Boston Snowplough</td>
<td>Susan Margaret Rabie</td>
<td>Human and Rosseau</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. A Veil of Footsteps</td>
<td>Breyten Breytenbach</td>
<td>Human and Rosseau</td>
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<tr>
<td>25. Behind Every Successful Man</td>
<td>Zukiswa Wanner</td>
<td>Kwela Books (NB Publishers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>26. The Rowing Lesson</td>
<td>Anne Landsman</td>
<td>Kwela Books (NB Publishers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>27. Ancient Rites</td>
<td>Andrew Diaile Tholwe</td>
<td>Kwela Books (NB Publishers)</td>
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<td>28. Tears of an Angel</td>
<td>Sello Jeffrey Mahapeletsia</td>
<td>Kwela Books (NB Publishers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>30. Praise Routine Number 4</td>
<td>Michael P Rands</td>
<td>Human and Rosseau</td>
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<tr>
<td>31. Heartfruit</td>
<td>Ingrid Leonie Wolfaardt</td>
<td>Human and Rosseau</td>
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<tr>
<td>32. The Lahnee’s Pleasure</td>
<td>Ronnie Govender</td>
<td>Jacana Media</td>
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<tr>
<td>33. The One That Got Away</td>
<td>Zoë Wicomb</td>
<td>Umuzi (Random House Struik)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. The Club</td>
<td>Edyth Bulbrin</td>
<td>Jonathan Ball Publishers</td>
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<tr>
<td>35. The Rainbow Has no Pink</td>
<td>Hamish Hoosen Pillay</td>
<td>Jonathan Ball Publishers</td>
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<tr>
<td>36. Bodies Politic</td>
<td>Michiel Heyns</td>
<td>Jonathan Ball Publishers</td>
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<tr>
<td>37. The Lighted Rooms</td>
<td>Richard Mason</td>
<td>Jonathan Ball Publishers</td>
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Shortlists and winners of the English section of M-Net Prize, the English section of the University of Johannesburg Prize, and the Sunday Times-Alan Paton Fiction Prize, 2009 (covering works published in 2008)

**M-Net Prize**
- *The Rowing Lesson* (Anne Landsman)
- *Bodies Politic* (Michiel Heyns)
- *The Impostor* (Damon Galgut)
- *The One That Got Away* (Zoë Wicomb)
- *Shepherds and Butchers* (Chris Marnewick)

Winner: *The Rowing Lesson* (Anne Landsman)

**UJ Prize**

**Main Prize:**
- *The Impostor* (Damon Galgut)
- *Bodies Politic* (Michiel Heyns)
- *Three Letter Plague* (Jonny Steinberg)
- *Notes from the Dementia Ward* (Finuala Dowling)

**Debut Prize:**
- *In a Different Time* (Peter Harris)
- *Shepherds and Butchers* (Chris Marnewick)
- *The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam* (Lauren Liebenberg)

Winners: Main prize, *The Impostor* (Damon Galgut); debut prize, *Shepherds and Butchers* (Chris Marnewick)

**Sunday Times-Alan Paton Literary Prize (Fiction)**
- *Whiplash* (Tracey Farren)
- *The Impostor* (Damon Galgut)
- *Bodies Politic* (Michiel Heyns)
- *The Rowing Lesson* (Anne Landsman)
- *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* (Mandla Langa)

Winner: *The Rowing Lesson* (Anne Landsman)

(Peter Harris’s *In a Different Time* won the non-fiction category of the above-mentioned Prize.)
APPENDIX 2: M-Net Prize Judges’ Notes, 2009

A: JANE ROSENTHAL

1. General Comments on submissions for the M-Net Fiction Award 2009
The standard of entries for this year’s M-Net English Fiction Award is ... gratifyingly high. There are at least five novels (not all on my shortlist) that could hold their own in the broader context of world literature. The submissions are also extremely diverse, ranging from a novel on the history of Catholic missions in Natal [Michael Cawood Green’s *For the Sake of Silence*] to a story of a prostitute in Muizenberg [Tracey Farren’s *Whiplash*], from a dystopian view of the future in South Africa [Lauren Beukes’s *Moxyland*] to a brilliant memoirish novel on the Cape in the early part of the twentieth century [Anne Landsman’s *The Rowing Lesson*]. It also includes a clutch of thrillers, which ... have not been written as serious literary novels, and deserve a separate prize...

There are two historical novels (Heyns and Green), but only a handful ... which touched overtly on South African politics (Breytenbach [*A Veil of Footsteps*], Galgut [*The Impostor*], [Ingrid] Wolfardt [*Heartfruit*] and [Denis] Beckett [*Magenta*]).

Writers this year have shown how much South Africa and South Africans have become part of the wider world, and at the same time have retained their connections in love, nostalgia, rootedness, identity with their home country. Both Wicomb and Landsman live overseas and have written powerfully evocative novels set (mainly) in South Africa. Conversely, Heyns, who lives in South Africa, has recreated (created?) an entirely believable London family scenario. Beukes’s novel is set in a dystopian future in ... the Cape Town she knows, and mourns, in the novel.

The general loosening up of consciousness and convention is also reflected in the crossing over into opposite genders – Landsman creates Harold’s inner world, and Heyns does an astonishing depiction of the voices of three women a century ago.

Violence and its devastating destruction of the psyche and society are frequently featured.

Extended and elaborated forms of fiction are evident in this year’s submissions. Many of the works have a strong basis in fact as in memoirs, travelogues, researched history, true crime, the working of the justice system. The most successful of these hybrid fictional works manifest a carefully sustained tone and structure ... it seems that the definition of fiction is widening. Perhaps if Ivan Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys* had been submitted this year it may have been accepted.

2. Comments in Preparation for Judges’ Meeting, Cape Town, May 2009

2.1 *The Rowing Lesson* (Anne Landsman)
I found this book an exhilarating and astonishing read. It is narrated mainly in the second person: Betsy is addressing Harold, her father, on his death bed, in a sustained stream of consciousness. This is an old phrase but it seems apt for a book in which the river is so important; it includes a potent and intense mixture of the medical and physical, the natural world of light and water, many family myths and stories, fears and anger. It is often funny, irreverent and clever.
Born and raised in the southern Cape, Harold Klein, a ‘clever boytjie’, is a very small, slender man, but makes up for it in vitality, intelligence and wit, and is his own idiosyncratic self to the last. His first and last trips up the river at Wilderness, to its source, Ebb and Flow, are beautifully evoked. In the first we see the young man Harold – sympathetic, warm, erotically charged, and a healer – not afraid to look and touch where there is pain. And here the conjunction of natural beauty on the river, the pain and menstrual blood of one of the girls, the dramatic sacrifice of the embroidered tablecloth, and erotic undertones, are a good example of how Landsman throws together the elements of enchantment. When Harold makes his last trip up the river he is still the same man: emotional, imaginative, attuned to the natural world, both in the loved landscape and in human bodies.

Landsman touches lightly and lovingly on the old towns of George and Wilderness, skilfully and amusingly demarcates the complexities within the Jewish community, and holds together a shimmering portrait of an era of the Old South Africa and the place of Jews in that time. Harold, as a country doctor, knew the entire community around Robertson and Worcester, despite his outspoken “liberal” politics. The toughness of medical realities and the humour save the novel from any touch of sentimentality.

That Harold was a skilled oarsman is significant in a book in which rowing is an important metaphor: one has to keep on an even keel, and go forward while facing backward (a point made by Gorra in the New York Times). Betsy, dealing with her grief, does this. In an interview with Shaun de Waal, Landsman said the book was “almost an attempt to resuscitate him (Harold) in the imagination.”... She has succeeded in bringing the past and the present into a seamless unity in which Betsy embraces ... her father’s life and world, while moving forward in her own time ... She allows the reader that same high order of experience, and this accounts ... for my sense of exhilaration while reading it ...

... there have been (fairly) similar books, even ... within the tiny ambit of Jewish South African memoirs: Dan Jacobson, Rose Zwi, Nadine Gordimer. And referring again to a judge’s comment, Leon de Kock has praised the transnationalism of her conception of this work. This is a new idea to me, but now that he has mentioned it, it seems so obviously part of our new world. But I have kept it at the top of my ranking for the ... breathtaking virtuosity of the writing. Landsman never allows the lyricism, complexity, subtlety, or the joie de vivre, to slip.

2.2 I do not have a novel in 2nd place here, as I feel there is a ... gap, in execution and significance, between The Rowing Lesson and the others ranked below.

2.3 Bodies Politic (Michiel Heyns)
I greatly enjoyed reading this novel, from its daring opening passages in which Heyns skilfully begins as he means to go on. He plunges the reader into an argument between two forceful women, Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter, Christabel, over the suitability of dingy rooms above a shop in Wapping, for a woman of Emmeline’s class and political fame. But this is a side issue to the main purpose of Christabel’s visit to her mother which is to report on the further scandalous behaviour of Sylvia, the other daughter.

Readers are immediately apprised of a number of things: in language and tone Heyns has achieved the era, class and socio-political concerns of his characters as perfectly as
if he were one of them. This is a remarkable feat for a South African man, with Afrikaans as his *moedertaal*, a century later. ...

The novel deals with feminism and family, both overtly in its subject-matter and more subtly in the embedded critique in the depiction of the three women: Emmeline fails as a mother ... Christabel is imperious and self-serving; Sylvia presents the positive results of her upbringing though she is opposed to her mother from her childhood days – she is the most rational, humane and truly liberated of them all ... this book may not be directly about South Africa, but it certainly has relevance for us here. Feminism in South Africa has had a rocky ride, often debased by its own most fervent practitioners ... Despite its relevance in dealing with feminism, family dynamics, the pain of our personal flaws and isolations, the transience of political issues, it does not seem hugely important as a South African novel. Perhaps it speaks most directly about the hypocrisy of political champions of the poor who themselves live in luxury ... It is a feather in the cap of Heyns, but I doubt it will become a classic of South African literature. ...

2.4 *The Impostor* (Damon Galgut) and 4) *The One That Got Away* (Zoë Wicomb)

2.4.1 *The Impostor* (Damon Galgut)

This novel is the most accessible of Galgut’s novels to date, and has a very clever plot. It deals with a number of interesting issues and ideas. These include: the disempowerment of young white males in post-1994 South Africa; the new dispensation in country towns with struggle-istas as mayors, vulnerable to corruption; the arts as a “proper job”; the notion of identity; power in the old and new eras in the hands of cops, government officials, gangsters and developers. However, I found the language ... cold and flat ... Despite the issues and difficulties that the characters have ... the emotional tone of the novel remains subdued and I found it difficult to get involved or identify with any of them.

The title declares at the outset that this novel will address morality ... But Adam himself is guilty of many immoral acts ... Predictably, it’s an impressively clever novel, but Adam’s very insecure sense of his own identity, though it may be a comment on the philosophical nonsense of such ideas, is discomforting to the reader. Despite its many lessons and challenges, the novel falls short of really engaging the reader.

2.4.2 (Tied with 4.1) *The One That Got Away* (Zoë Wicomb)

These elegant and clever short stories are ... loosely linked to each other by having a character in one story crop up again in another one. They are set in the Cape and in Glasgow and reflect Zoë Wicomb’s unique experience of living in these two places.

Wicomb puts her theoretical academic background to good use as she examines various currently hot issues. Gender relations surface in that many of the stories deal with marriage relationships, but with an interesting slant to them in that she examines the cross currents of intercultural marriage, or the results of such cultural mixes several generations down. Colonialism and the uses of the arts then and now are also woven into the mix, as are the effects of marriages on friendships and the broader community. ...

And when it comes to language, Wicomb doesn’t pussyfoot around with translations of the untranslatable. *Gevrek* is the word she uses. *Wittebrood, bedonderd, dronklap*. No
glossary ... This language is startling and fresh in any context, and a plain claim to space and dignity.

The connections between the stories are not always ... easily noticed. For example, the work of the pompous historian from a different story is tucked away, having become part of a whimsical and rather obscure art work made by Janie’s husband. Wicomb circles around within the loose structure, skillful and assured, tying a few strong knots ...

Although it seems more likely that Wicomb is writing for an academic reader, this would still be a book for serious lovers of South African fiction ... Wicomb can stand her ground in this area with Annie Proulx and Alice Munro, women from other ex-colonies.

I have put this quite low on my list as these stories lack the warmth to delight and involve the ‘common reader’; they are a little too clever for their own good. Hopefully now Wicomb can and will move on from these old bones that she keeps on digging out of the stoot.

2.5 Shepherds and Butchers (Chris Marnewick)
This moving and ... shocking novel achieved its place on my original shortlist on account of its memorability, and its ... coolness of tone which renders it all the more passionate. It is a ... horrifying read at times, but engrossing to a degree.

However, I found the end quite disappointing. The author makes it quite clear that his primary concerns are the moral and legal principles involved in the death sentence, and the brutalising effect of executions ... This also seems to indicate that it is Marnewick or his alter ego that is the central character here. As this was not so at the start, it makes the novel fall apart somewhat at the end.

Although this novel may be read as an indictment of the death penalty, it seems to me that it really only leaves the matter open for debate ... It also indicates that a deeper reading is needed, outside the legal sphere, in which the causes of psychic damage and criminality are addressed. It is an important book for us to read, but a little unwieldy and didactic as a novel.

2.6 Additional Note on Moxylan by Lauren Beukes
[This title was originally on Rosenthal’s shortlist but did not make it onto the final shortlist after deliberation among the three judges.]

... In Moxylan Beukes has moved out of conventional Struggle politics to a conception of the future in which corporate business is all powerful, and engaged in a tyrannous suppression of the population more ruthless than anything ever seen before ... Beukes introduces us to this frighteningly bleak world through a small cast of characters ... Beukes has achieved a fast and readable, with a set of characters that evoke delight, astonishment, fear and grief in rapid succession. This is an impressive novel which can easily stand alongside ... Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake, David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas and Russell Hoban’s Ridley Walker. For the evocation of a specific city in the future it compares favourably with Ronald Wright’s’s A Scientific Romance. Its time setting in 2018 seems a bit soon for some of Beukes’s predictions ...
B: ROSS DEVENISH

1. Comments in Preparation for Judges’ Meeting, Cape Town, May 2009
1.1 The Impostor

... This really has something to say and is a genuinely South African book ... about now with its betrayals, disloyalties and corruption set against the spectres of the past in the shape of the ultimately unfortunate “man in blue” [protagonist’s curious neighbour]. A really masterful and mature piece of writing, in a way more like a musical composition than just plain narrative; notes apparently casually struck have powerful reverberations and echoes later...

This is certainly a post-apartheid novel. Can this be said of any of the others? ... All in all it is very much a novel ... of the society that the Mbeki years have created. ...

1.2 Bodies Politic

Further from South Africa it would be harder to be in this very English world of the British suffragette movement in the company of some pretty terrifying women, who in seeming to have taken on men had taken on Lady Macbeth’s injunction to “unsex me here”.... Michiel [Heyns] captures the rudate parlance of the period, an articulacy designed to hide emotion. A very impressive achievement and an extraordinary imaginative interpretation of historical facts and the emotional desert of so many of the English middle classes, but is in the end valid for this award? ... A wonderful achievement, but it is the English who should be praising it.

1.3 The Rowing Lesson

So beautifully written, it is almost poetry, an ... elegy for a lost father. I also found the father’s narrative difficult to cope with and could never suspend disbelief. However close to a parent their lives are ones which I could only glimpse, so much is hidden from the children and I could certainly never presume to say to a lost parent ‘you did this, or thought that’. I really had to force myself to continue reading through these passages. I know that this book has champions and while I admire aspects of it I cannot vote for it.

1.4 Shepherds and Butchers

Impressive book. It held me throughout after I had got over the discomfort of reading about the hangings and their technical details. I was thoroughly sickened and I wondered if I would be able to continue at the end of the first chapter. I put the book to one side for a day or so and read another book on the list, then returned to it realising eventually that the details of the executions were not gratuitous but essential to the telling of this story ... It has all the elements of a good courtroom drama, but it has something much more important encoded with it, a real debate on the issue of the death penalty, an issue that could become more urgent should populist issues become the order of the day in the new administration looking for a distraction from non-delivery ... What the book does very effectively is to show the terrible cost that all the killers have to pay; both the legal and illegal ones in these judicial murders. It is particularly timely considering the demand for the return of the death penalty.

Leaving all this aside it makes for a gripping and intense read, but it is also an intensely
Leon de Kock

South African read ... It could reach a wider audience if we encouraged readers to be brave enough to face it and it could give M-Net some kudos instead of going for something alien or soft ... 

1.5 The One That Got Away
Some very nice writing, but I found so many of the links very tenuous, slight; very thin gruel. I personally could not see that it qualifies as a novel. It is very literate and I am sure that Zoë Wicomb has written better things, but I wanted something more full-blooded – and perhaps the reading public does too ...

C: LEON DE KOCK

1. General Comments on Submissions for the M-Net Fiction Award 2009
Apart from the works on the shortlist, notable entries include Megan Voysey-Braig’s Till We Can Keep an Animal, in which the unusual feature of a murdered woman as narrator provides a unique subject-position for the purposes of fictional enunciation; Lauren Liebenberg’s The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam, a brilliant narrative contrast between a mature narrator retelling childhood subjectivity, and the experiences of the child herself, lyrically rendered as an allegory of beauty and evil in the colonial (Rhodesian) bush; Diale Tholwe’s Ancient Rites, in which an unusual conjunction of detective narrative and ‘traditional’ practice melds in a truly innovative narrative; several ‘chick-lit’ type variants, including Vuquiswa Wanner’s Behind Every Successful Man, Rosamund Kendall’s impressive ‘doctor-doctor’ saga, Karma Suture, and to some extent, Lauren Beukes’s Moxyland … a number of good crime-detective-violence tales, including Edyth Bulbring’s horrifyingly gripping The Club; Jassie Mackenzie’s Random Violence; Rozena Maart’s The Writing Circle; Mike Nicol’s Payback and Hamish Hoosen Pillay’s The Rainbow Has No Pin.... and a strong strand of fiction dealing with violence against women, including Joanne Fedler’s Things Without a Name, Maart’s The Writing Circle and Tracey Farren’s Whiplash. Curious, when viewed against the prevalence of ‘chick-lit’ type stories and fiction awash with South African social violence, is the absence of any significant gay writing, apart from The Rainbow Has No Pink. The high quality of fiction in this year’s entries is attested to by the fact that it was very hard to arrive at a shortlist, and difficult to have to leave out works of quality such as Michael Cawood Green’s For the Sake of Silence, Voysey-Braig’s Till We Can Keep an Animal, Liebenberg’s The Voluptuous Delights, and several others.

2. Comments in Preparation for Judges’ Meeting, Cape Town, May 2009
...my criteria were readability, imaginative range, economy of fiction, scope of vision (moral, ethical, spiritual, analytical), and, most important of all, what I call a work’s inner intelligence. That is, the implicit intelligence of its narrative and verbal artistry, and the message it conveys through its very structuration, its working effect.

2.1 The Rowing Lesson
The Rowing Lesson is a novel of extraordinary narrative texture and perceptual acuity.
Although it is often a hard book to read, this is the same kind of readerly density one experiences in many works of great literature, such as, for example, some of James Joyce’s novels. . . . the rewards of reading through . . . the observing first person, into the projected third person, are significant in that the novel has performed a virtuoso feat in the matter of dealing with alterity. This is no small achievement, alterity being, in some senses, the matter of all our writing since ‘South Africa’ came into being in its various modes as a contested polity of selves and others. . . . Not only does the author reimage her father’s life, but . . . she also reconstructs a frame for her own reconciliation with the idea of what that life was . . . It is a remarkable act of novelistic awakening—the awakening in a writerly and readerly imagination of the full scope of the world into which many of us were born and out of which we have vanished.

2.2 Bodies Politic

Bodies Politic is compulsively readable, its stylised thrust-and-parry dialogue almost Shakespearian in its wit, its force of riposte and hauteur, understatement and crushing put-down. The novel does with quite consummate skill the one thing that only novels—when handled at this level of mastery—can do: juxtapose with acute irony the segmented realities which characters create via their angles of vision, as against the language of justification with which they arm themselves to give this segmented, perspective-dazzled vision the semblance, the illusion of amplitude . . . That Heyns, with such seeming effortlessness, is able to bring together this unpatterned universe in such a deliciously poised narrative pattern, playing god, yet showing his characters to be at the mercy not only of circumstance and history but also of themselves—despite every effort at mastery—is a tour de force. If this novel doesn’t deal with South Africa directly, it certainly deals with it implicitly: how many bodies haven’t been crucified in the name of politics, just in the past few months, especially in the Zuma-saga? How many alliances, intimacies, intimations of love, have not been forsaken on the cross of a cause, an ambition, a sense of the body politic emanating from one body’s ambition to shape the world?

2.3 The Impostor

The Impostor is a thrillingly readable novel, with Ian McEwan-like undertones of sinister goings on, and a fable-like sense of characters trapped in a story not of their own making and beyond their own understanding. The main character displays a stunted agency typical of Galgut’s work, in which human subjects are remorselessly unaware of the gap between their self-projections and the webbed, entrapping nature of their actual circumstances . . . The Impostor is a superbly rendered, atmospherically loaded, stylised piece of fiction that commands admiration.

2.4 Shepherds and Butchers

Shepherds and Butchers is a novel of stunning impact and revelatory power. It . . . defies the strong current trend in South African fiction of walking away from the politics and horrors of the ‘old’ South Africa. However, it makes a bridge between the newer writing—which is increasingly replete with detailed scenes of ‘criminal’ violence—and an older history in which socialised violence has always been a kind of social gruel, a sickening staple.
diet. Marnewick’s dispassionate, forensic style of fact-accumulation is the perfect foil to the sheer horror of the hangings (and the murders which led to the hangings) which his novel so chillingly describes.

2.5 The One That Got Away
The One That Got Away is a spare book with deft, delicate, suggestive, disparate yet interlinked tales. These stories of the personal intersecting with distance and difference (surely one of our most common themes) are written with great skill, and a great reserve of the implicit, the unsaid ... it raises issues of representation and being in an implicitly metafictional register instead of blindly stepping into the marshes of (inevitably) selective or partial renderings of ‘reality’ as a done deal. The voices in the stories are polyphonically rendered and suggestive of carnivalesque (and often gently amusing, gently satirical) scenes of human tragicomedy.