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Jikeleza Labyrinth

Reflexive Essay

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An essay submitted to the School of Literature and Language Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research).

Declaration

I declare that this essay and the novel, *Jikeleza Labyrinth*, are my own unaided work. They are submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Neither has been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university. I declare that *Jikeleza Labyrinth* is a work of fiction and in no way represents or reproduces any person or incident. Any likeness or similarity is coincidence.

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Karen Ramburuth-Hurt

27 August 2010

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Introduction

I set out to write a South African adventure novel for young adult readers. My main objectives were to entertain, through a story that had some depth and celebrated children's agency; and to enjoy, learn and extend myself in writing *Jikeleza Labyrinth*, my first attempt at a novel. Watts captures some of what I wanted to achieve when he said:

> And whether or not we are aware of it happening, stories shape our perception of the world. Life is confusing, sometimes threatening; the story can either help us evade this grim fact or help us get to grips with it … And whether the tale is told around a camp fire or in the pages of a book, the audience is seeking the fulfilment of these same three needs: entertainment, escape, understanding. (Watts, 2003: 16)

Jikeleza Labyrinth takes place in a contemporary setting with a historical back-story that solves the mystery of the skull that teen protagonist, Kabelo Nomvalo, inadvertently finds in the river in the opening scene. Zakes Mda, at the *Time of the Writer* International Writers' Festival in Durban in 2004, said, 'I am interested in how history formed the present. I shuttle between the past and the future because I am interested in the present'. I too wanted to draw a particular thread of South African history through the story to highlight how choices made in the past influence and shape the present, and may have unanticipated connections and consequences.

This essay

In this essay, I explain how the story idea for *Jikeleza Labyrinth* emerged and took shape; and how my approach to character development evolved over time, along with what I grappled with in the physical description of my characters. I look at my choice of using multiple points of view in telling the story, and issues to do with aiming at a young adult readership. This essay reflects on some of the other issues I dealt with relating to context, history, politics and narrative voice. All of the young adult characters in *Jikeleza Labyrinth* faced various degrees of uncertainty and trauma, and the story has violence in it; implied and described. This led me to reflect on writing violence in teenage literature. Research was an important part of my writing project, and I outline some of this in the section headed 'Striving for authenticity'. Writing character- and action-driven fiction was nerve-racking at times, but I gradually settled into it, and in this essay I explain how. I look briefly at my writing process, both when participating in the MA programme workshops, and writing 'alone'. In the conclusion I reflect on what writing this story meant for me and what I hope will come out of it.

Where this story began

There was an old house with a wraparound verandah and a garden with a lookout point across the Chinsta River just before it made a final curve to meet the sea. The property, with its front lawn bordered with wild bush, became an annual holiday rendezvous over several summers for me, my partner, our children, and our friends. At different times of day and night, I often stood at the lookout point and watched the activity on and across the river, and along the coastline. I loved walking to the backpackers' place and to the village to buy supplies and potter around. I also loved lying on the hammock in the shade of the Wild Fig tree, and letting my imagination run free. All of this led to *Jikeleza Labyrinth's* fictional characters, places and plot scenes taking shape, with Chintsa as their birthplace.

Zakes Mda said that for him, a novel begins with place, followed by characters, then plot and the story. 'This place deserves a novel,' he related at a writers' festival, saying how he loved the scenery while driving through the Eastern Cape. My own story idea for a novel was also strongly evoked by place, the Chintsa River and its surrounds, coincidentally just south of Qolorha, where a large part of Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* is set.

Creating characters

I began writing early scenes in December 2004, with Jikeleza[1] Route, between Chintsa and East London as the setting for the action. The writing group I was a member of at the time gave me critical feedback and encouragement. I was delighted when I was accepted on the MA in Writing programme, because of the disciplined and literary environment in which I could complete a novel.

Once I had a sense of the place, plot and characters emerged. My novel soon became character- and action-driven. Early in the writing process I used Lajos Egri's book *The Art of Dramatic Writing – Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives* to assist with character development:

[1] Jikeleza is an isiXhosa expression from *ukujikeleza*, which means 'to go around'. Whilst on a writing retreat in 2008, I walked a labyrinth at full moon in the Magaliesberg, Gauteng. The second part of my novel's title was evoked that night, and represented Kabelo's journey in the story. It only later turned out to suit Anneliese's journey too.

> Human beings have … three dimensions: physiology, sociology, psychology. Without a knowledge of these three dimensions we cannot appraise a human being. (Egri, 2004: 34)

I created a grid with the headings physiology, sociology and psychology and applied them to Kabelo, Rebecca, Sameer and Don. Although it was a useful early tool, it had its limitations. It was when I let my characters loose into action that I learnt most about them. I only discovered some personality traits when completing the last chapters of the novel, and during some of the later revisions. Anneliese, who was not in my original cast, is a case in point. She made an unplanned entrance in the story when Rebecca and Sameer went to look at photographs at the internet café. As the storyline developed, and Anneliese's home life took on a particular profile, her sense of wanting truth and justice was something I would not have been able to anticipate in applying a character grid to her during the early stage of the writing process. Anneliese simply evolved along with the narrative's development.

I wanted to write a novel with complex characters, ones with whom a broad range of young adult readers could identify. Rebecca and Sameer were on holiday in Chintsa. Kabelo lived on the opposite side of the river where his father was a boutique hotel manager. A drug syndicate operated in the region. It held the answer to why Kabelo's mother went missing two years ago. Don was Kabelo's best friend but got into the club and drug scene, and became a runner in deep trouble with his dealer. Kabelo discovered a skull on the riverbed. The young protagonists' adventure included rescuing a friend, discovering what happened to Kabelo's mother, who the skull belonged to, and exposing a drug syndicate. They also found, and deepened, friendships forged through danger. Rebecca and Kabelo experienced first love; they all discovered treachery in the most unexpected person, and tapped into the well of their own capacity for tenacity and courage.

With regard to the number of protagonists, Watts has cautioned about having more than one:

> If you have more than one protagonist, they should ideally be intimately connected, that is:
> - be in a relationship together, or
> - have their fates bound together, or
> - face a common source of conflict.
>
> In other words, though distinct in themselves, they should share a common quest. (Watts, 2003: 76)

This assisted me in checking that each character had a purpose in the novel. In my first draft, Kabelo's older cousin had come to live with him and his father to help look after Kabelo and the home. Her name was Puleng, and I particularly enjoyed writing a scene when they were much younger. But ultimately Puleng did nothing to advance the story. Following the advice of many writers, I took it out and froze it for a future story, in the hope that it is true that no scene is ever wasted. I tried to be ruthless, even with my favourite scenes, in the final revisions and edit in order to bring the essential story to the fore.

My biggest surprise was Anneliese. She was not in my proposal, and yet ultimately she became a key protagonist, and a character who featured with great courage and determination. Initially, when she was at the internet café where we first meet her, and in a couple more subsequent scenes, she seemed to exist to create dramatic tension between Kabelo and Rebecca. I felt uncomfortable because it felt like a stereotypical role – the jealous girl, even though Anneliese and Kabelo's relationship did not reach girlfriend/boyfriend formality because of Anneliese's father. I did not consciously ask myself in an issue-based way how I was going to get her out of that role. Anneliese's presence and complexity grew when it emerged that her parents were divorced, and that her father was racist, contrary to Anneliese, who was a modern, but not naïve, more integrated South African teenager. In addition, her uncle, an apartheid-era covert operative, emerged in the story, initially assisting with getting Pit Bull's phone records, and later through Anneliese's detective work, they discovered he was probably implicated in killing The General's brother.

With the direction the storyline took came the growth of Anneliese's demand for a point of view. This kind of character development is why I enjoyed writing in a character- and action-driven way; not only did the unexpected happen to the characters, it was also often a surprise to the writer. Rebecca and Sameer were very much part of the adventure, but it ultimately became Kabelo's and Anneliese's labyrinths. Another unexpected development was having Kabelo's mother in an early scene, where Kabelo had a flashback to the night that she disappeared. It was a poignant and difficult scene to write, knowing that his mother would be killed.

Driven by my work as a commissioned materials developer for Soul Buddyz Club, Soul City[2] I read and write about children dealing with trauma, including that of having their parents pass away. I lost my father, who died of a heart attack in my arms when I was 20 years old, and experienced the sea change in family structure and responsibilities but not in the extreme circumstances that many South African children do. My compassion for Kabelo's loss, which for me represented the trauma of many children, was deep and took me away from writing the story for a while.

Resolving description of characters

From the outset, I had a stronger sense of my characters' personalities and emotions than of their physical appearance. I typed and deleted many bits of description, especially of Kabelo, Rebecca and Sameer, who were the main characters that I focused on in the early period of writing the novel. Slipping in adjectives about hair, skin, and body shape felt forced, but I kept trying as some of the advice in writing for young adults included the importance of describing physical description. In March 2007 I still thought that in order to write the narrative, I needed a picture in my mind of my characters.

I dug out old photographs, went through magazines, and took photo cuttings from newspapers. I stuck them in a large scrapbook. The scrapbook gathered dust. Yet the process helped me to reach a new view on writing physical appearance. I thought about some of my favourite novels, and realised that if the author had described his or her characters in detail, I hadn't absorbed it. One example for me is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Roy refused to sell the movie rights of this 1997 Booker Prize winning novel. Despite the money she would certainly have made, she argued that she wanted each reader to keep the integrity of how they visualised the story intact.

I wrote in my journal: 'Maybe I can get away with minimal description and then the relationships, the dialogue, the action, carry it'. I didn't want to describe 'almond shaped eyes' and 'caramel' or 'cinnamon' or 'milky' coloured skin, as if I dunked my protagonists in the baking section of my kitchen cupboard before bringing them onto the stage.

[2] The Soul City Institute for Health & Development Communication is a health promotion organisation. Amongst its advocacy, research, and information-sharing programmes is Soul Buddyz Club, a children's club movement based mainly in primary schools all over South Africa. In March 2010, there were 5 635 clubs and 115 474 members, the majority being in rural areas. The clubs' key objective is 'to make a difference' in dealing with socio-economic challenges.

Other than an adjective here or there, I decided that I wanted readers to have the freedom to conjure the characters' physical appearance for themselves, depending on their own world view and experience – on how *they* thought or wanted the characters to look like. Once I embraced that decision, I felt liberated. And delighted, recently, to read Elmore Leonard's rule: 'Avoid detailed description of characters'.[3]

In her book *Reading Like a Writer,* Francine Prose says of Kleist:

> Among the unusual things about the way that Kleist creates his characters is that he does so entirely without physical description. There is no information, not a single detail, about the Marquise's appearance. (Prose, 2007: 115)

I hoped that readers would imbibe, through different scenes, action and dialogue, the sense that the protagonists were a group of racially and culturally diverse, largely middle-class young South Africans. Despite my background, I didn't want to force gender, race, class and culture as foregrounded issues in the novel. Ultimately *Jikeleza Labyrinth* was an adventure about a vibrant group of teenagers who solved some mysteries and brought down a drug syndicate; and in the writing of the story, it was about me having the pleasure and luxury to let go of issue-driven writing.

Writing multiple points of view

That each protagonist had a point of view emerged spontaneously. I liked the triangle of perspectives when Kabelo found the skull in the river, and both Rebecca and Sameer observed him from different places, Rebecca from the lookout point, and Sameer from the riverbank, close to where Kabelo threw the skull. It introduced the reader immediately to three of the main characters. I thought multiple points of view would engage the reader; and offer a closer relationship with, and understanding of the main characters' actions. The readers could be in on the action far more than if I had a single point of view. I could move my figurative camera from the shoulder of one character and scene and cut away to the next. I liked that the reader could follow the romance between Kabelo and Rebecca from each of their perspectives; and hoped that this would make my novel appealing to both young adult men and women.

[3] *Review* section, London's *Saturday Guardian* 20.02.10: 2, in an article asking authors for their dos and don'ts.

Stephanie Meyer wrote the phenomenally successful Twilight series using first-person narrative. It has largely but not exclusively appealed to young women and their mothers (who were keen to know what all the fuss was about). I was interested to hear teenage girls, who feverishly borrowed and lent copies from our household, say that the main teen girl protagonist, Isabella (Bella), irritated them. I reflected that it could well partly have been because the four books were written predominantly in the first person. The girls (and their mothers) seemed more interested in the sexy male protagonists than Bella, and divided themselves into either 'team Edward' (vampire) or 'team Jacob' (werewolf).

Using multiple points of view offered me a way to create a good pace, an important contract to keep with readers in my genre. Towards the end of the novel, I was able to build up the tempo and cut between the scene where Anneliese and Rebecca were at the old torture site, and the scene where Kabelo had entered The General's property to rescue Don and discover what happened to his mother. According to Christopher Vogler's outline for The Stages of the Hero's Journey in *The Writer's Journey*, both scenes roughly align with stages seven to nine, and fall into the 'crisis' section of the storyline. Those stages are:

7. Approach to the Inmost Cave
8. Ordeal
9. Reward (Seizing of the Sword).

(Vogler, 1998: 14)

I hoped the multiple points of view and rapid scene cutting in this 'crisis' part of the novel would help heighten readers' sense of tension and of being right in there with the protagonists' action.

With multiple points of view, I was probably influenced by Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, which I read many years ago. Much of the novel is set in the 1950s and 1960s in the then Congo, now Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), during the violent end of Belgian colonial rule. The four young daughters and mother in the story each have their own point of view. As a reader, I loved having access to their range of personalities, perspectives, voices and actions. It made parts of the story more compelling and chilling, and also made me, as a reader, feel as if I lived with that family, and hung out with different members at different times. The remote, obsessive and frightening missionary father had no point of view. In my novel, neither did Don. This is explored further in the research section

below. He remained remote to me throughout the novel. I made several efforts to give him a point of view, to reach a deeper understanding of how his mind was working. But Don was enigmatic and secretive, and too close to the world of manipulation and addiction, for me to get close to him. He was edgy, and private in an unreliable way, rather than Anneliese, for example, who at times drew a screen around herself, but did not build a wall.

Sawyer offered a tip that helped guide me: 'The rule is simple: pick one character, and follow the entire scene through his or her eyes only' (Sawyer, 1996: 3). It wasn't easy, nevertheless, and I didn't always get it right in my first drafts where I found myself slipping from one character to the next within lines, and occasionally becoming an omniscient narrator. I played with shifting point of view within a paragraph as opposed to in a chapter, or chapter section. One of the reassurances when writing the story is knowing that there is the opportunity to go back and rewrite and edit. Each subsequent edit allowed me to be more mindful of whose shoulder my camera was on, and also in getting to know my characters' personalities better, I could make adjustments to dialogue, mannerisms, relationships and action.

One of Philip Pullman's comments in an interview about *His Dark Materials* trilogy resonated with me. He said, 'I always write in the third person, as if seeing them [my characters] from the outside; they trust me not to try and get inside their skin. Maybe'.[4] Yet, Andre Brink, at a Cape Town Book Fair forum in June 2007, said that when you as the author 'leap into the skin of another it sets creative sparks flying – it is that imagining yourself in the skin of another'. During the revision process I particularly struggled with the degree of access I wanted the narrator to have to the teenage characters' interiority. I didn't want an invasive narrator with access to all inner thoughts and feelings, especially with teenage protagonists.

My experience with teenagers, both as a former high-school teacher and as a mother whose car, home and days are regularly filled with teenagers' conversations, made me mindful of their desire for social and spatial privacy and room in which to evolve toward young adulthood. I quickly learnt that butting in to certain types of conversations more often than not led to a change of topic, or an evacuation of the vicinity. Writing this novel taught me to listen more; having children and teenagers constantly around enriched my novel writing. With the range of teenagers in my life, including several who are either orphans or have

[4] See http://www.kidsreads.com/authors/au-pullman-philip.asp retrieved 08.02.2010.

experienced the death of one parent at a fairly early age, I am aware that each child transforming into a young adult does so differently. Each child is complex and many children's circumstances and family lives are complicated; children have to make sense of their lives in an increasingly fragmented multiple message society. I struggled to articulate this during some of my presentation sessions in the MA class, where I felt that sometimes there was a generalised, stereotypical view of what teenagers are like (hormone-driven, selfish and rude; unlikely to do household chores). My own understanding and experience of young people grappling with trauma and loss of a parent, and in some cases of the anxiety of financial deprivation amongst other problems, differed. Each teenager is far more nuanced, affected and shaped by background, parenting styles and belief systems, family, economic class, and community circumstance than the general stereotypical view of teenagers allows.

While writing *Jikeleza Labyrinth*, I used different tools to understand my youthful characters, and their motivations and desires. I did not try to 'get inside their skin'. Following more guides and authors' advice than I can list here, I decided to write in the past tense with a third-person limited point of view.

Reaching a range of readers

EB White's words are pertinent when it comes to writing for children: 'No one can write decently who is distrustful of the reader's intelligence, or whose attitude is patronising' (quoted in Lamb, 2001: 174).

I tried to write the kind of novel that while aimed at young adults, would attract a wider range of readers. One of the members of my writing group said she enjoyed reading the early chapters because it was like a 'pantomime'; she liked that it appealed to her as an adult, and also that it would appeal to younger people.

When my children were younger, we read novels aloud as a family. Amongst others, we read *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night* by Mike Haddon, *Journey to the River Sea* by Eva Ibbotson, and JK Rowling's Harry Potter series. I loved that books like these could be appreciated and interpreted differently at various ages, and the sense that they are books children might return to read as adults and discover new depths in them. Such novels help promote conversations in the families where they are read. They offer a common platform

from which family members can initiate discussions and debates, with anything from 'What's your favourite part?' to 'How did you feel when Bella decided she was prepared to risk her life by having sex with Edward?' and 'What did you think of Hermione [from Harry Potter] taking up the struggle of the house-elves?' and together reflect on similarities between the increasing fascism of the Ministry of Magic in the Harry Potter books with world history.

In an interview[5] Philip Pullman was asked, 'Does children's literature give you the freedom to use that kind of omniscient narrative voice in a more confident way than you could in an adult book?' Here is an extract of his response, which found resonance with me:

> I find it hard to understand how some writers can say with great confidence, 'Oh, I write for fourth grade children' or 'I write for boys of 12 or 13'. How do they know? I don't know. I would rather consider myself in the rather romantic position of the old storyteller in the marketplace: you sit down on your little bit of carpet with your hat upturned in front of you, and you start to tell a story … My interest as a storyteller is to have as big an audience as possible. That will include children, I hope, and it will include adults, I hope. If dogs and horses want to stop and listen, they're welcome as well.

Louis Sachar, another award winning writer of children's literature said this, when asked in an interview[6] what makes *Holes* special:

> I think it is a very entertaining story, very exciting story, thought provoking, and a puzzle. And it's not written down to kids, I write for my enjoyment, things that I like, so it respects its readers, treats its readers as intelligent, caring, smart people, and I think it brings out the best qualities of the reader.

Eva Ibbotson's adventure novel *Journey to the River Sea* is an exciting and subtly political narrative set in Manaus, Brazil and along the Amazon River in the very early 1900s. Maia, following the death of her parents, leaves her boarding school in England with a governess to live with her thoroughly prejudiced and unpleasant British relatives in Manaus. Through the action of the storyline, the historical and political background, and flora and fauna of the Amazon are evoked for the reader. In an interview[7] Eva Ibbotson said:

> And of course, one is particularly careful when writing for children to keep things moving and not get bogged down by sunsets or moral asides. With both kinds of books [adult and children], it is finding the voice in which to narrate that is the problem.

[5] Philip Pullman: The Storyteller's Art – A conversation with James Mustich, Editor-in-Chief, Barnes & Noble Review 12/3/07 www.barnesandnoble.com/bn-review/interview.asp retrieved 24.02.2010.
[6] See http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/holes/louis.Sachar.htm retrieved 08.02.2010.
[7] See http://www.indiebound.org/author-interviews/ibbotsoneva retrieved 08.02.2010.

This was the kind of novel I aspired to write, one which captured the interest of a broad readership; a novel that treated its readers with intelligence and respect, and that offered both a contemporary and historical background. I avoided writing about sunrises and sunsets.

Jody Metcalfe, a teenager and avid reader in my social circle, requested to read the chapters that I'd written at that point, which in mid-2007, was up to chapter 7. Here is an extract from my journal:

> At one point she [Jody] burst out laughing. It was about Rebecca jumping onto Sameer's bed. That's when I knew that I would keep that part in. Jody said that her favourite character was Sameer because he is funny. She also asked if Kabelo and Rebecca would become more than friends. I said that I thought so. Then she said that she liked the skull in the beginning of the story. I told her that some of my class hadn't liked it at all, and explained why. She said that adults don't understand what children/teenagers like to read about. But she didn't want the skull to belong to Kabelo's mom. And she was worried about Kabelo's mom. She asked what happens to her and I said that I wouldn't tell her. She is excited about the story.

Her reading of my rough work was valuable in touching base with my readership, and in thinking through how to handle the skull, which remained one of my main resolution concerns when writing.

Context, history, politics and narrative voice

Jikeleza Labyrinth is a work of fiction but some parts, particularly the historical back-story, were influenced by life experiences. The 1980s and early 1990s was a brutal period in South Africa's history. I was involved in a range of non-racial organisations, women's, workers', and teachers', and taught at a white girls' high school in Durban, and then worked for a non-profit socialist feminist women's magazine, SPEAK. Thousands of people died in the United Democratic Front/African National Congress/Inkatha Freedom Party conflict during that time. There were allegations of a third force operating. Political allegiances tore some families apart. Many anti-apartheid activists left the country to join liberation armies, another wave after the 1976 Soweto uprising. Activists went missing; some were killed on the orders of seniors in control of the apartheid government's covert operations' squads.

With The General's character in *Jikeleza Labyrinth* I acknowledged the generation of disillusioned freedom fighters who lost out in the new dispensation; and, as the plot unfolded, Anneliese's uncle represented those who chose not to take responsibility for what they did

either in ordering or implementing assassinations of activists during apartheid. Despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process in post-apartheid South Africa, there are still families of missing activists who remain, many years later, trapped in the agony of not being able to find closure relating to what happened to their loved ones. The General was one such person in the novel, with the protagonists beginning to unlock the truth about his missing brother through finding the skull with a crack on its top and a hole in the back, which could be consistent with a bullet shot, together with the photograph and bullet casing that Anneliese discovered hidden in her mother's cupboard. There are still apartheid-era senior decision-makers and operatives who have neither disclosed nor taken responsibility for their actions. In the novel, I chose not to give Anneliese's uncle a name.

Amitav Ghosh, speaking about his writing at the Origins Centre[8] said, 'Activism and the novel do not go well together'. In an article about Arundhati Roy's celebrated return to fiction writing, journalist Randeep Ramesh captured this quote[9] from her, which echoes Ghosh's:

> My fiction is never about an issue. I don't set myself some political task and weave a story around it. I might as well write a straightforward non-fiction piece if that is what I wanted to do.

I wanted to suspend the activist in me while writing and this was not always easy. But I knew that failing to do so would affect the narrative voice, which would become intrusive, didactic and off-putting for my readers.

During the early stages of writing *Jikeleza Labyrinth* I struggled with the narrator's persona and voice, and consciously tried to strip it of one of my main nonfiction persona and voices, which I use in developing children's theme-based materials. James N Frey wrote about the nonfiction narrative voice, saying:

> In nonfiction, a strong narrative voice is created by tone and a command of facts. In fiction, a strong narrative voice is created by tone and a command of detail. (Frey, 1994: 81)

My nonfiction narrator's job is to care, guide, inform and offer children interesting information and engaging activities around themes like bullying, being body wise, HIV and AIDS, alcohol and violence, handling trauma, amongst many other issues of concern. My job

[8] *The Words on Water Literature Festival*, Origins Centre, University of the Witwatersrand, 23 August 2007.
[9] Randeep Ramesh, *The Guardian*, 17 February 2007.

is to try to keep children out of trouble, safe, and enjoy their childhood. I would describe my tone as 'friendly adult'. In my novel I had to get my characters *into* harm's way.

Violence and trauma in teenage literature

Some members of my MA workshop class were unhappy about Kabelo finding a skull in the river, given that his mother had gone missing. Although I hadn't yet worked out to whom the skull belonged, and still didn't know whose it was until I wrote the last few chapters in late 2009, I was always certain that it did not belong to Kabelo's mother. It did distress me somewhat, working as a materials' developer for children, that I had created a storyline that my class generally found a no-go area. Had I lost my boundaries? And even in my final edit, I worried that it might disturb the reader that they only discover right at the end of the novel that the skull is not Kabelo's mother's.

When I finally came towards writing the part that sealed the fate of Kabelo's mother, I stopped writing for a few weeks. I didn't want her to be dead; I didn't want Kabelo to have to face the finality of his mother having been murdered. I wrote in my journal: 'Kabelo's mom & dying. Do I add to the dead bodies in SA? Worried about gratuitous violence. Or am I trying to show the ruthlessness of the drug world?'

I grappled with other issues. How was Kabelo's mother killed? How gruesome could I, would I get? Would I describe or would I imply? What on earth was I doing to my readers? I rationalised that the death of a parent would resonate with my readers. It was the friendships with Rebecca, Sameer and Anneliese, forged through the adventure that would help Kabelo get through it. In a *Paris Review* interview, Peter Carey was asked about writing 'graphic descriptions of violence and incestuous abuse' in *The Tax Inspector*. The interviewer asked 'Did you feel a moral imperative in taking on that kind of material?' Carey concluded his response by saying:

> If you are going to break a taboo or imagine evil and put it on the earth you better have a good moral reason. You better hope that it is doing something that justifies its existence. (*The Paris Review Interviews* vol. II, 2007: 458)

I did not write gratuitous violence, but I still felt I needed to justify the trauma in my story to myself. I did not set out to write a novel that described teenagers rolling joints, shooting heroine, chasing the dragon, or being raped by tik-pumped addicts. Rather, I wanted to

foreground the workings of a drug syndicate in as authentic a way as possible; and to show how deeply cynical it is that most kingpins do not use drugs themselves, and some even live their lives regarded as upstanding philanthropists. I was moved by John le Carré's thriller, *The Constant Gardener*, which depicted the way a European pharmaceutical company deviously tested drugs on black working-class Kenyans. I found the story and characters compelling and believable. When I put the book down, I felt angry. I wanted my readers to understand the workings of a drug syndicate, and also to be angry.

Ted Leggett's book *Rainbow Vice: The Drugs and Sex Industries in the New South Africa* was invaluable for an overview of the drug user and distribution scene in South Africa. He wrote:

> But most disturbingly, a democratic South Africa has proved irresistibly attractive to international syndicates. Its geographical location and permeable borders have made it an ideal transshipment site and, in a pattern seen elsewhere, locally based couriers (paid in drugs rather than an unpredictable local currency) tend to create a market for their product. (Leggett, 2001: 19)

Kabelo's mother was killed because of the brutality that goes into protecting the multi-billion rand global drug industry. Uncle Richard represented the notion, or premise, that people are not always who they seem to be. I hoped that in some ways Uncle Richard would evoke the disillusionment and distaste with, for example, sportspeople who cheat and lie, and politicians who have let us down and live double-standard lives. The implied torture scene with The General's brother was a culmination of the back-story that gradually developed from the time it emerged that Anneliese's uncle had been an apartheid-era covert operative.

Reading Peter Harris's *In a Different Time* brought back the horrors of torture that I had heard and read about during the 1980s and early 1990s. The memory of, together with a colleague, interviewing Zizile Cothoza from Lamontville, Durban when I worked for SPEAK magazine haunted me for much of The General and Anneliese's scenes. Cothoza's daughter was a student activist who had gone into exile, and then went missing. When we interviewed Cothoza in 1988, she related that someone had suggested that she travel to Piet Retief because she may find her missing daughter there. Together with other parents, Cothoza entered the room where the bodies were. She said:

> There was a terrible smell. We saw our children put together. Some were put one on top of the other. Ntsiki's body was badly damaged. I could hardly recognise her. (SPEAK, 1988/89: 23)

Ntsiki was abducted and killed with other cadres on Eugene de Kok's orders[10] in 1988. She had a young son, Lunga. Cothoza tried to shield her grandson from what happened to his mother. She related to us that when Lunga saw some police in the street, he told her that 'he hates police because they killed his mother. He is only four, but he knows what it means to hate' (SPEAK, 1988/89: 23).

It is naïve to believe that we can protect children from violence. They experience it directly, and throughout world history, always have, even though adults often try to imagine that somehow they don't, as if there is a magic curtain that screens and protects children from it. Adults are quick to shake their heads in amazement and say, 'Children are resilient'.

Children are in cars that are hijacked; they live in families where there is violence, sometimes directed at them; they go through their parents' separations which are usually trauma-filled; children live in the communities where there are robberies, gangs, and where police fire rubber bullets during service delivery protests. Like everyone else, children absorb their experiences, and are shaped by them. I felt there was justification for the trauma and violence in *Jikeleza Labyrinth*, and that my readers would make sense of it.

Striving for authenticity

> A strong narrative voice creates a feeling in the reader that the writer knows what he or she is talking about. It creates trust. It lets the reader relax the critical faculty and go with the flow of the words. (Frey, 1994: 81)

Anthony Horowitz, a prolific children's author was at the Cape Town Book Fair in 2007 and spoke to a room full of young fans. One of his best-known series, commonly described as junior James Bond in genre, is the Alex Rider adventures, including *Eagle Strike*, *Scorpia* and *Ark Angel*. Regarding research, Horowitz said that he visits the places where the book is set, speaks to people and experts, and uses the internet extensively. Credibility was important to him, he said 'then the reader will buy into the fantasy'. He spoke about a paragraph set on an oil rig that he had been uncertain about. He held back on the novel's publication until he'd taken a trip and spent time on an oil rig, and, only then satisfied, wrote the final version of it.

[10] Eugene de Kok applied for amnesty for this during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission amnesty committee in Durban. Reported http://www.iol.co.za/general/news/newsprint.php?art_id=ct19990726225236413D200638&sf= retrieved 07.03.2010.

When asked at a book signing in Johannesburg, shortly before the book fair, why there are so few parents in his books, he replied, 'Because everyone knows that children can't have fun when their parents are around'. It took me a while, but I did ultimately fade Kabelo's father, and Rebecca's and Sameer's grandmother and father further into the background of the story.

Research played a vital and invigorating role throughout the writing of *Jikeleza Labyrinth*. Authenticity is important to me too; it makes me feel secure as a writer, and I believe readers take it as a sign of respect. I did research to help try to ensure my plot was authentic, details were accurate, and characters believable.

I struggled with the boundaries regarding fictionalising an existing place and drew on Lamb, quoting Barbara Shapiro, for reassurance:

> You are writing fiction, not fact. If you are to fashion an effective plot, you must discard the facts as you know them in the service of a larger truth. Taking this risk is the only way to make the leap into a story that reflects the reality you know, as well as the world you imagine. (Lamb, 2001: 112)

I decided to take Zakes Mda's route. On his Dedication page in *The Heart of Redness*, he wrote: 'As for the people of Qolorha, they will forgive me for reinventing their lives'. I hoped the people of Chintsa and East London would do the same.

I read many books about drugs, including Melinda Ferguson's autobiographical *Smacked*, Melvin Burgess's novel *junk*, and *Out to Score* by Mike Nicol and Joanne Hichens. I also read many books aimed at young adults, some of which have been mentioned in this essay and are listed in the reference section. I spent many hours on the internet, reading about many things: drugs, drug syndicates, searching for things like night vision binoculars, canoeing, the difference between pool, snooker and billiards, birds and trees in the Eastern Cape, the kind of giraffe to expect to find in a game reserve close to Chintsa (with this one, eventually I spoke to a giraffe expert in Mpumalanga; giraffe are apparently not indigenous to the Eastern Cape), and I kept up with newspaper articles touching on the themes and plots in my story.

Visit to East London and surrounds

In May 2007, I took a trip to East London and Chintsa. I met Michael Potgieter,[11] an investigating officer based at a local East London police station. I wanted to meet with him because he'd published a booklet on drugs and youth. Meeting with Potgieter helped me to familiarise myself with the youth and drug scene in East London. Farhana Mohamed of the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) East London[12] office helped me think about the teen addict side of my story. She spoke about how some children they saw turned to drugs because their parents were too busy for them, that children feel lonely, and also the impact of divorce on children, who often blame themselves and seek consolation by using drugs. Mohamed highlighted the link between drugs and sexual activity. She told me of a school-age teenager who slept with married men to get cocaine.

I visited the city's main hospital, explored East London's CBD, and drove out to Chintsa to visit the old house, garden and lookout point. I took photographs, and browsed around Chintsa on both sides of the river, and back and forth along Jikeleza Route, stopping here and there to take photographs. The photographs later proved useful to me throughout the writing process. When I got stuck I popped back to my novel's location, zooming in and out. I kept one photograph in particular on my Jo'burg office notice board throughout my novel writing process. It is of a rusting corrugated iron house, taken not far from where we used to stay. For a long time it represented for me the scene where Kabelo would encounter The General and find out what happened to his mother. However, eventually in the novel The General's property is bigger and smarter, and does not even have a corrugated building on it. But the photograph served me well; one evening I examined it more closely and noticed for the first time that there was a very small part of a rondavel's thatched roof visible beyond the iron shack. Noticing this gave me a lever to create the scene with the three rondavels on The General's property in one of the final chapters.

In the summer holidays between early December 2007 and early January 2008, I rented a huge house, in a different part of Chintsa to where we had stayed before. We shared it with various friends and family. This gave me an opportunity to sink into and explore the location

[11] 7 May 2007, East London.
[12] 10 May 2007, East London.

of my novel over a longer period; there were few sunny days and much drizzle during that time!

Early on I wanted to test my plot and syndicate scenario with experts, and, amongst other things, to find out more about communication methods within syndicates. Colonel Devon Naicker, the national head of narcotics and organised crime from the South African Police Service (SAPS) met me[13] at his Pretoria office and assisted with my questions. Over the subsequent four-year period, during which I have seen him on TV and quoted in newspapers about international drug syndicate busts and other drug-related issues, he has responded to my requests for help with technical questions, and encouraged my project.

I discovered a similar generosity of spirit with the many people who gave of their time to help while I was developing my story. To learn more about the security industry I met[14] Andy Henry, owner of Firearm & Self Defence Academy (FADSA) in Johannesburg. Henry originally trained as a pharmacist and this helped me when discussing the factory in my story, and as a police reservist he could tell me about drug busts. I walked out of our meeting having learnt, amongst other things, about bullet casings and what kinds of firearms people in the covert operations' squads during apartheid would probably have used, as well as likely arms the drug syndicate would have used.

These interview opportunities assisted me to move ahead and write certain scenes more confidently, for example, the Dazzlers, the night factory, and Kabelo at The General's property scenes. Talking about my plot also helped me to think things through. There were times when I felt I couldn't write any more until I had done the research, even though I didn't use much of the technical detail in the final version of the story.

Understanding Don

In my journal I wrote: 'Don decided to stop. Am struggling to find an authentic, compelling reason'. Rafiq Mayet, the director of the Crescent of Hope, a drug rehabilitation centre in the Magaliesberg, Gauteng, agreed to meet me.[15] After he'd answered my questions relating to drugs, detection of drugs, and withdrawal, amongst other things, he asked all of the men

[13] 5 September 2007, Pretoria.
[14] 30 July 2009, Johannesburg.
[15] 11 August 2009, Magaliesberg.

participating in the residential rehabilitation programme to assemble in the conference room and assist me with my questions for my novel. There were about 20 men, aged probably from around 16 to 60, who, once I'd explained why I was there, freely offered their experiences, opinions and suggestions.

Meeting the director, the supervisor and the men in the rehabilitation programme at the Crescent of Hope helped me understand Don's emotional state, and more about the club drug and drug syndicate scenes. The interaction helped me reach a resolution about what made Don stop using drugs and want to pull out of being a runner in the drug syndicate. Initially, I had conceptualised a scene where he looked in the mirror one day and noticed that the drugs had decimated his former good looks and athletic physique. He'd recently seen Kabelo, who reminded him of what a mess he'd made of his life, and had told him that he was washing his hands of Don, despite their close friendship. I ran the mirror part of this idea past the men in the programme, and they shook their heads. They told me that as an addict when you look in the mirror you only see your former self. They said it was only when you had lost everything, and you were on the streets, or had some enormous crisis, like being arrested and thrown in jail and experienced the harshness of prison life, for example, that you face what your life has become, and reflect on what you have lost. During revisions, I amplified the terror of Don's experience with the club owner and Pit Bull, and the subsequent near-death assault, and hoped that it would resonate authentically for any readers who'd experienced drug syndicate life in some way.

In concluding this section of my essay, I'd like to reflect on a scene and plot element in *Jikeleza Labyrinth* that had worried me regarding plausibility. It is the part where Kabelo tells the others that his mother had left behind a note with three hand-drawn hearts, with a circle around the middle heart. The note said: 'Love you both. *Uziphathe kakuhle*'.[16] How likely was it that she would do that? It bothered me until I recalled an experience from 1986 during the State of Emergency. A small group of us, women activists, decided to monitor The Ecumenical Centre, where SPEAK and many other non-governmental organisations' offices were housed, from a building opposite. There had generally been security police raids, crack downs and detentions in and around Durban, and although it sounds somewhat naïve now, we felt it important that we did some surveillance. Suddenly soldiers, in Casspirs, pulled up

[16] Translation from isiXhosa: 'Stay safe'.

outside, jumped out, and stood with guns pointed up towards the building we were in. The street outside was filled with security force vehicles and soldiers. It was chilling. I looked from the window I was standing next to back to one of the women with us. She was at a desk, frantically scribbling a note to her two small children.

Language

Using some Afrikaans and isiXhosa dialogue in the novel felt instinctive because, along with English, they are the main languages one hears in the Eastern Cape. Vuyo Fatman, a member of my MA programme class, assisted me with translations, as well as with feedback on a close-to-final version of the novel. This was invaluable assistance, especially since Vuyo's roots are in the Eastern Cape, and she took a keen interest in the development of my story from the beginning.

Writing character- and action-driven fiction

When asked in an interview whether she knew how *The Secret Life of Bees* would end when she began writing the novel, Sue Monk Kidd replied:

> When I began the novel, not only did I have no idea of the ending, but I was clueless about the middle … As I neared the conclusion, I knew some aspects of the ending but not all of them. (Monk Kidd, 2003, interview: 12)

Although I had a sense of *Jikeleza Labyrinth's* opening and ending, and just some scene sketches in between, writing in a character- and action-drive way often made me feel anxious. It was the opposite way in which I write most of my nonfiction, which is carefully briefed, planned and structured from beginning to end, with some allowance for creativity in the writing process. I did not have a thoroughly worked out plot, like some adventure writers, such as Anthony Horowitz, say they do before they start the actual writing. This is an entry in one of my journals in late 2008:

> The puzzle pieces emerge as you write. A broad idea of the narrative, then let things happen. It is more nerve-racking for a first time writer because of worrying that it wouldn't cohere. My worry is mainly the skull and how to resolve (link with The General).

It was finally in late November 2009, when writing the chapter where Anneliese takes Rebecca up the river to the apartheid-era torture site, that the skull was resolved as probably belonging to The General's brother. I had felt for some time before that the skull was linked

to The General's life story, but had shuffled between it belonging to his sister, girlfriend or wife. When the puzzle piece finally fell into place, it was both a relief, and also somehow felt very obvious. Despite The General being part of the drug syndicate, I felt compassion for him. At a Narrative Journalism Conference,[17] Zakes Mda said, 'You as writers must care for your characters – even stone throwers and villains'. He said that when you understand the villain, 'you understand the humanity of the villain'. In the same lecture, he said, '*Ubuntu* guides fictional characters – treat them all with generosity and compassion. Don't judge them. Let readers decide. Once you get to know a character, understand their actions'.

Anne Lamott also wrote about compassion and understanding your characters, no matter who they are:

> As you learn who your characters are, compassion for them will grow. There shouldn't be just a single important character in your work for whom you have compassion. You need to feel it even for the villain – in fact, especially for the villain. Life is not like formula fiction. The villain has a heart, and the hero has great flaws. You've got to pay attention to what each character says, so you can know each of their hearts. (Lamott, 1995: 69)

A shift happened during the course of writing the story. In 2007, I had written a small scene for one of the last chapters, where Kabelo confronts The General. I wrote in my journal:

> The General says, 'I saw you there, different colours, being equal. I didn't fight to destroy the next generation. I didn't struggle for drugs kind of death. I don't want to get rich on other people's suffering'.

When I re-read it I was sure my readers would roll their eyes. I deleted it, and realised with even more certainty how, as the novel progresses, the writer gets to know the characters, and understands their psychology and motives; through action character is revealed, and I was reminded about not using a novel as a platform for promoting an agenda. When I re-wrote that scene in December 2009, The General had become hardened, cynical and opportunist – although I did feel compassion for him because of his political disillusionment, and anguish at not knowing what had happened to his activist brother.

I tried time and again when writing the scene at the rondavels on The General's property to see if Kabelo could feel compassion and forgiveness for The General, but I understood when he couldn't: anger, disgust and heart break were his uppermost emotions. Nevertheless, Kabelo was prepared to give The General a way out so that the rest of the syndicate, and

[17] *Tools for Storytelling*, organised by frayintermedia, Johannesburg, 21 May 2008.

corrupt cops, could be bust and prosecuted. Pit Bull killed Kabelo's mother; The General disposed of her body in the sea. Finally knowing what happened to his mother was a relief to Kabelo; that she was taken out to sea was something that comforted rather than horrified him; the sea was always there.

The writing process and participation in the MA programme workshops

Being new to fiction writing, I used the proposal phase as an opportunity to read widely, and to discover more about point of view, plot and character development, premise and themes. The MA workshop programme was stimulating and useful for writing to deadline, and for giving and receiving feedback.

I am used to giving and receiving feedback; my nonfiction work is commissioned writing, I have been part of several writing groups, and have been a mentor for nonfiction writers. At SPEAK in the 1980s we wrote collectively and critiqued our work vigorously. It wasn't always easy. Nevertheless I can only describe the MA workshop environment as 'character building'. You, the writer, remain silent and make notes while everyone takes turns to give feedback on the work you have sent to them a week before. What fascinated me was how, after the first round of feedback, another layer of discussion, more often than not reflecting on and interrogating the first, and offering new suggestions and recommendations took place, almost like a second, deeper dive. Sometimes participants retracted earlier views, or offered new insights, analysis and references for reading. Only after this was it the writer's turn to respond to the feedback. The discipline of listening before engaging with one's class's feedback worked well for me. I picked up on general weaknesses, like over-description, to revise and strengthen. Some class members gave detailed comments on the text, which I found very useful; it is helpful to know where there are weaknesses, and it is also important to hear about the parts where your writing seems to be working, or the story particularly interested or entertained. About half of *Jikeleza Labyrinth* was presented in the workshop, which I consider my first phase of writing. During my second phase I wrote without feedback until the first full draft of the novel was completed and presented to my supervisor. I enjoyed working this way, writing with more confidence and skill in the second phase, as a result of the learning process in the first.

Participating in the Caine Prize Workshop[18] in April 2008 was a turning point for me in developing more confidence in fiction writing. There were 12 participants from seven African countries; some were short-listed Caine Prize for African Writing writers. We were brought to the workshop for ten days with the sole purpose of writing short stories. Each one of us had to leave behind a short story. All the participants' short stories were published in *The Caine Prize for African Writing, 8th Annual Collection: jambula tree and other stories*[19]. The opportunity of dedicated time in which to create and complete a short story, having a diverse group of participants to engage with both formally and informally, and the presence of facilitators who gave feedback on our writing was stimulating, and on my return I was more confident in writing *Jikeleza Labyrinth.*

The benefit of having a range of supervisors in class resulted in an unexpected spin-off for me: one of the supervisors invited me to submit some unpublished chapters for a high-school publication he was developing. The opening scene of *Jikeleza Labyrinth* was published in the anthology,[20] where it is used to highlight point of view.

When stuck with a scene, I often drew in my sketchbook. One example was trying to get Don out of the hospital; another was getting Kabelo onto The General's property. I drew several versions of The General's property and fencing around it. I looked at photographs of properties around Chintsa and in the more rural parts of the Eastern Cape. I had Kabelo walking up and down the dirt road in my mind's eye, trying to work out how he would get in. It was like playing a Harry Potter PlayStation game where you try endlessly and unsuccessfully to find the door through which Harry Potter gets to the next level so he can vanquish an enemy or retrieve a vital object. Initially I wasn't even sure what The General's property and its buildings looked like. It was through drawing and redrawing the location, and looking at photographs as a tool to stimulate my imagination that I eventually worked it out. In addition to sketches, I used mind maps extensively to think through character, scene, relationships, and plot.

[18] Monkey Valley, Noordhoek, Western Cape.
[19] The title of my short story is 'Where you came from'.
[20] Compiled by Chris Thurman, titled *Text BITES – South African poems, plays, stories and non-fiction.*

Conclusion

I set out to learn about fiction writing through creating an adventure novel for young adults. I wanted to offer a South African story that entertained and resonated, and offered the reader a chance to escape, and perhaps, to reflect on some of the themes, like trust, loyalty, addiction, loss, friendship, first love, and choices, that surfaced through the story.

In a speech called *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *Purple Hibiscus*, a story set in postcolonial Nigeria of 15-year old Kambili, growing up under increasingly difficult family conditions, said:

> Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity. (Adichie, 2009)

I hope, after putting *Jikeleza Labyrinth* into a drawer for a few months, and taking it out to work further on strengthening it, I am able to find a publisher, and that South African teenagers will enjoy it for the entertaining adventure it is meant to be. Along the way, I will be very satisfied if it can ‘empower’ and ‘humanize’ in any small way.

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