

# Interview with Mandla Langa

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## Introduction

I first became aware of the writing of Mandla Langa when I opened up his novel, *Tenderness of Blood*, sometime in the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> From the first paragraph, I was captivated by the intensity of the prose and the fate of the characters. The novel deals with issues of loyalty and betrayal at both the personal and political level. These issues are all too familiar to anyone who was involved with the South African liberation struggle — one wishes they were not so familiar — and they are no doubt familiar to anyone who has been involved in any political struggle.

The South African liberation struggle was infused with a special mystique. For many it symbolized the ultimate struggle against racial oppression and for democracy, a pivotal battle in the struggle for democracy and development in the African continent, and simultaneously a battle against capitalism and for social and economic justice. All these forms of social oppression and exploitation were seen by many to be thoroughly interconnected in the South African case; hence, eliminating one, many people believed, would automatically lead on to the elimination of the next. This struggle, symbolizing so many people's dreams and visions for the future, became mythologized.

*Tenderness of Blood* takes us inside the liberation struggle, allowing us to see it from the perspectives of

some of those who were involved in it and to see the foibles, weaknesses and limitations of the individuals involved in that struggle. Those who performed courageous political acts could also lack emotional courage in their close relationships; personal failures could impel individuals to take great political risks. The novel is an intimate account of one man's political and emotional journey in the 1970s from his student days at Fort Hare to his imprisonment on Robben Island. The name of the novel's protagonist, Mkhonto, is an allusion to *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), meaning spear of the nation — the armed-struggle organization linked to the African National Congress (ANC).

In writing about South African fiction of the 1980s, Stephen Clingman argues that the 1980s represented a turning point. Prior to that, South African fiction had been concerned with representing the past and the present. South African fiction of the 1980s, he contends, was much more preoccupied with speculations of the future. He also suggests that black fiction writers were more concerned with collective agency, while white writers highlighted the individual.<sup>2</sup> *Tenderness of Blood* does not, however, fall into this schema. As well as the continuous tensions between the personal and the political that are unveiled in the novel, there is a constant conversation between the past, the present and the future, anticipated society

and between Mkhonto's own past, present and uncertain future.

Much of the novel's background draws on the author's own experiences. Mandla Langa was born in Durban in 1950 and was raised in the African township of KwaMashu, near Durban. As a child he showed an early interest in art and story-telling, and he combined these two interests by drawing cartoons to tell stories. He studied for a B.A. at the University of Fort Hare. Arrested in 1976, he subsequently fled the country and went into exile in Botswana. During his exile years in Africa, he trained in MK camps in Angola and began to write prose in earnest. In Europe he worked for the ANC and was its cultural representative. He has published two other novels and a collection of short stories and has written a musical opera, "Milestones", in collaboration with the jazz musician Hugh Masekela.<sup>3</sup> He is currently chairperson of the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA).

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**AD: The journalist and cultural writer Mark Gevisser has written that your collection of short stories, *The Naked Song and Other Stories*, deals with the trauma of return from exile and with the transition from a period where the liberation movement defined individual values and ethics to one where, in the post-apartheid era, individuals have to define themselves.<sup>4</sup> Yet this tension between the individual and the collective movement — the personal and the political — has always defined your prose, it seems to me. This theme is very prominent in your first published novel, *Tenderness of Blood*. When did you begin writing *Tenderness of Blood*, where were you and what were the influences on you?**

ML: *Tenderness of Blood* was published in 1987 but the manuscript was ready by 1985. It took quite a number of years and spans a wide section of my life and the lives of others. It reflects the post-black con-

sciousness period in the sense that the main character, Mkhonto, had been weaned in that philosophy but also had become part of ANC politics, which are presented in the novel in a fictionalized manner. The novel was informed by some of the conflicts then taking place in South Africa, especially the so-called black-on-black violence. It concerns notions of loyalty and betrayal at both the political and the personal level. It was an attempt to exorcise some of the politics of schools and of campus life. Fort Hare was a very important backdrop to the novel and to the events of the 1970s.

The novel was written when I was in exile, mainly in Budapest, Hungary. I went into exile in 1976, in Botswana, and was there until the early 1980s. In 1977 I attended the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Nigeria, which was a very memorable milestone. In 1979 I traveled to the US. When I went back to Botswana I found that a transformation was taking place there. What was then Rhodesia's incursions into Botswana and Zambia were becoming commonplace. In response, there was a removal of refugees from South Africa and other Southern African countries to a town called Dukwe in the north. The rationale was that people were being moved to make sure that they would be in a place that was defensible. This made people very insecure and unhappy. So, taking the advice of colleagues, I got on a plane for Lesotho. That was a very scary experience. Some weeks earlier some friends had been captured when the plane they had been flying in, en route to Lesotho, was forced to land at Bloemfontein.

During the period in Lesotho I won the *Drum* short story contest.<sup>5</sup> Prior to that I had been writing poetry. The award was very important for me. It gave me a feeling that in becoming a prize-winning short story teller that there was something for me in prose that I could build on. The skeleton of *Tenderness of Blood* came about while I was in Lesotho. Between 1980

and 1982 I was also in the training camps in Angola, and I was in Lusaka, Zambia in 1982. There, I worked in the ANC's Department of Information and Publicity (DIP), headed by Thabo Mbeki. In that department I would work in the office in the day, and at night I would come back and work on the novel. We had typewriters in those years, not word processors.

In 1983 I went to Hungary to study journalism in Budapest. I was there with a lot of people from other countries of the so-called Third World. Being there gave me that distance in which I could create characters without their impinging on me.

**AD: What do you mean by that?**

ML: I mean that in a situation where there is an ongoing political struggle a writer could end up being less of a novelist and more of a journalist, reporting what was going on. I wanted to create my own characters and to breathe life into them.

The novel was handed to a friend, Chenjerai Hove, who was the editor of Zimbabwe Publishing House. The title, *Tenderness of Blood*, refers to a poem by Augustino Neto that I heard in Angola. Neto was the first president of liberated Angola and very highly respected. The poem is called "Haste" but unfortunately I don't have the full text.

**AD: *Tenderness of Blood* is very much a novel steeped in its time and with a very strong sense of place. It presents an intimate picture of an intense moment in the South African liberation struggle. As I read it, I could not help comparing it with *Burger's Daughter* by Nadine Gordimer, which also deals with radical politics in the liberation movement during the 1970s. But your story concerns black radicals, while her novel is essentially a story of the white Communist left. Despite the commonalities between black and white South African radicals in these years, the two novels suggest that these groups also lived in separate worlds that only sometimes interconnected. What**

**are your thoughts on this?**

ML: It is sometimes difficult to comment on South African literature, especially that written by white writers. The difficulty comes from a certain, almost subconscious need to adopt what the writer James Baldwin calls a stand of helpless irony when referring to a body of writing. Because of its availability in the international arena, literature by white South African writers has been a magnifying glass or lens through which to view South Africa and its literature and culture. But for black South Africans, there is a certain ambivalence or schizophrenia because of your own political understanding. You think that the world needs to know, even if the message is imperfect. But also one is aware that the world prefers to eat a particular message and the menu that the world prefers to eat from is one that the world feels that it can stand without choking. White writers, no matter how well-meaning they may be, cannot fully understand the experience of black South Africans. But some have the humility to understand that they must deal with the subject in a manner that shows a recognition of this.

It is like when Diana Ross played Billie Holiday in the film *Lady Sings the Blues*. One could see that she was not just trying to imitate Billie Holiday but that she was paying homage. There has been an ongoing tension over the question of whether white writers can really represent black characters, and there is a certain resentment by black South African writers of whites who assume they can. For example, Romare Beardon a black collage artist in the United States has posed the question of what is black art.<sup>6</sup> Could we say that art produced by a white artist who has stayed in the ghetto is black art? These are the kinds of questions that we need to discuss. What redeems writers like Gordimer is that she understands that she is not in her terrain when dealing with black characters, and she chooses to express what she sees through white characters.

I think it was Martin Trump, a South African literary critic, who said that all South African literature in the past 50 years — he was writing around 1990 — has been anti-apartheid writing.<sup>7</sup> But if you look at the large body of this literature, it has been by white writers dealing with blacks.

**AD: Are you referring to particular white writers?**

ML: One can point to Alan Paton, for example. His image of blacks was consonant with the way white people thought of blacks. There was the stock-in-trade priest, the venal politician, the thuggish youth who comes into contact with city culture. His black characters are cut-outs who do not have their own inner consciousness.

**AD: Do you think that most white readers feel more comfortable reading books by white authors?**

ML: If the reading public in South Africa — by which I mean mainly the book-buying public, which is white and literate — wants to get an understanding of South Africa they will want to get this understanding from someone whom they can identify with and feel kinship with. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Gordimer, Paton, Coetzée and other white writers are known because of the structure of power that is in place. It is for this same reason that people outside Africa frequently have an image of Africa and of Africans shaped by writers like Wilbur Smith.

**AD: Both *Burger's Daughter* and *Tenderness of Blood* deal centrally with the relationships between different generations. *Burger's Daughter* is the story of a daughter coming to terms with her father's legacy — and ultimately joining the struggle for which he died, but joining it on her own term. *Tenderness of Blood* also deals with the generational theme, refracted through various characters. Your phrase, "this tender blood of the struggle...which connects us to more than five centuries of battle" (58), expresses the importance to these diverse characters of situating their**

**own political activities in a longer struggle. But they approach this by thinking about their relations with their parents and their parents' political responses to the South African situation. Do you think that the relationship between apartheid-era parents and post-apartheid youth differs significantly from earlier generational relationships here?**

ML: Each generation always imagines that it has a patent on truth. We thought that we were the bees' knees and knew it all. We did have those icons that we invoked but we also thought that had we lived under those conditions in those earlier years we could have sorted things out then and there.

I was fortunate in that I could straddle a number of periods and generations. I could relate to those who were both where I was as a youth and transpose that to where others were as old people. Where we were growing up in Durban there was always that mythical heroic figure of the ANC guerilla — someone who could infiltrate back into the country and teach military warfare and train cadres. When you heard that one of them had been captured that increased their heroism for us. When I left the country and met some of those people who had been mythologized it was possible to write about the reality and myth of what passes as generational conflict. There was one occasion in Tanzania that was particularly touching. There I had the fortune to meet some of the musicians and other artists who had been very huge in our minds and who had left South Africa in the 1960s. People like Jonas Gwangwa and Willy Kgositsile.<sup>8</sup> You meet them in circumstances where there is a leveling. You no longer use honorifics such as brother so-and-so but rather you say comrade so-and-so. You would then start to understand their vulnerability when they look at you. They see the optimism that you have and something resonates in their minds. But you also see in their eyes something that is quite frightening — the eyes of someone older who sees the potential for dis-

illusionment in someone younger. I did not really understand this until I began to write *Tenderness of Blood*.

**AD: But you were a young man when you were writing this novel.**

ML: Yes, I was a young man when I was writing this novel.

**AD: But were you able to imagine their feelings?**

ML: Yes, I was able to transcend, to imagine.

**AD: *Tenderness of Blood* is centrally concerned with the impact of imprisonment on its central character, Mkhonto. The question that Mkhonto asks himself at one stage, "Who are these men...who invented the whole concept of imprisonment" (p. 173), highlights the alien nature of imprisonment in Africa and more generally. Were you in prison?**

ML: I was in prison for three months in 1976.

**AD: Where was this?**

ML: It was in Zeerhurst, in the north. I was there for three months but most of this was in solitary and that is the time that one starts to come to terms with oneself. I have always felt hugely uncomfortable when I have been under restraint or seen others under restraint. I must also have been thinking of what impact the imprisonment of others had on them. What does it do to a person to imagine the term of a life sentence? How can they imagine that without going crazy?

I have a daughter, and you know that sometimes kids play games of trapping things. I just forbid her to do that. I just can't deal with those things. I can understand that there may be a need for imprisonment when an individual is a menace to a bigger collective but I am also aware of the abuses of imprisonment.

**AD: I would like to discuss the way that relations between black and white people are portrayed in *Tenderness of Blood*. I am thinking of the experiences of the black soldiers who went to fight in the first and**

**second world wars, and what the implications might be for anti-racist policies and reconciliation, both in South Africa and internationally. In particular, I wanted to ask you about the episode recounted in your novel, in which black South African soldiers are captured by Italian soldiers in Italy during the second world war and are sexually mutilated. One thinks of historical accounts of black South Africans and the second world war — for example Baruch Hirson's article.<sup>9</sup> The scholarly literature deals with themes such as the attitudes of the African National Congress and the Communist Party towards the war or left-wing debates about the war — abstract political debates. But I have not heard of this kind of atrocity before. If it is true, it is not widely known. Is that a true story? Did someone recount that incident to you?**

ML: Yes, it is a true story. Someone told me that story. This happened when I worked at the Felt and Textiles factory in Durban, just after I finished my junior certificate, in the year between that and matric. I worked as a canteen hand. I was hired as a cashier but ended up in the canteen. This was a very important experience for me. It was a very important place in the sense that notwithstanding the fact that black South Africans have common experiences of oppression, the experiences of working people are often glided over. We don't deal with their actual lived experiences.

This particular man worked in this factory, and I could see that there was something that was quite wounded about him. There was something in the way that he looked at the rest of us as we joked and laughed, as though he already had insights into the kind of future the country had in store for us. So, as we carried on like unconscious idiots, it was as if his look were saying that we'd wake up one day and realize that so much was at stake, and so much needed to be fought for. It was not until such time as he confided in me that I learned what had happened to him.

**AD: But this man was old enough to be your father?**

ML: He was. He was.

**AD: Yet he felt that he could confide in you?**

ML: Yes, he did. My family was quite well known, politically, and my father was a preacher. I think that, as a result, people felt open to me when I came to work there.

**AD: There must have been a group of men who came back from the war traumatized by this experience and who were not able to speak about it, except perhaps in individual cases.**

ML: Yes, I think so.

**AD: What do you feel about the prospects for reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa?**

ML: One of the remarkable successes of the present dispensation has been exactly that. We have gone through a process that invoked an exorcism. But what bedevils that success is the fact that the parameters that make up all the requirements for that forgiveness to be possible are not fully respected.

**AD: What do you mean?**

ML: It is still my personal feeling that there are people who were pardoned by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission who should not have been pardoned and people who could have been pardoned but who were not. One person in particular that I think of in this context is Craig Williamson. There are two reasons that I think this. It might seem strange that as a black person I am concerned with some of the more famous or celebrated of Williamson's victims, who were two white women and a white child, Ruth First and Jeanette Schoon and her daughter, Katryn Schoon.<sup>10</sup> Williamson has also been involved in the murder of blacks. But the things that stand out in these particular cases is firstly the question of the proportionality of the offense. If a political opponent is of significant strength — if the apartheid state wanted to go after Joe Slovo,

for instance — one might understand the use of extreme force. But here is one woman who is an academic and one woman who is a teacher, together with her child. For that not to have been taken on board by the powers that be in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I cannot understand. There is also the fact, secondly, that it is a breach of any convention of war to target civilians and especially women and children. When you kill a mother, you also kill the child; even if you don't kill the child physically, you kill it emotionally. For these reasons I think that the amnesty of Williamson is very problematic.

**AD: The themes of loyalty and betrayal in *Tenderness of Blood* — expressed through the characters' individual stories and the introspections about their personal and political responsibility for their own actions — almost anticipate the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which also concerns the issue of personal and organizational responsibility, including the responsibility of the ANC for its own behavior during the liberation struggle. What do you think is the novel's significance for the present?**

ML: I think there is a saying, "The future is certain; the past is unpredictable". There is the question of what constitutes facts and how they are used in the creation of our past. In present-day South Africa, a number of things have not been acknowledged. OK, there is the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which did bring out some of the issues and some of the past crimes. But if you look at circumstances such as F. W. DeKlerk ultimately ascending the podium as a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, for someone who has been through the oppression of the apartheid system, this is hard to understand. There is a possibility of redemption if people admit that we might have got it wrong and that we really are very, very sorry.

**AD: Have people said that?**

ML: No, people have not said that. They have said it as individuals. But when there is no acknowledgment of past crimes, there is a problem. People who have been abused will always remember the wrongs.

I would like to address an issue you have raised: namely, the question of whether apartheid crimes are equivalent to the crimes of the liberation movement. It is difficult for me to seriously deal with that idea of parity except in individual instances. But let me give an analogy. For some reason, I was always interested in the Vietnam War. You have this incredibly powerful state that is dealing with people thousands of miles away. The war was only widely seen when television cameras began to record it. But you will be forgiven today for thinking that the Vietnamese and the Americans were having a dispute in which both parties were responsible. In the United States, there were no bombings on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, their country was intact and the stock market didn't crash. But the harm that was transported to Laos, to Cambodia and elsewhere in the region was incalculable.

In South Africa, a similar situation is happening. We are always being enjoined never, never to bring up the past. If we addressed it we would have to do an audit of who did what. Someone would have to say, "I did this". In our own political situation there is a preoccupation with reconciliation and reconstruction. Reconciliation is one thing. There is a need for compromise, even if one has been hard done by. The state cannot afford the consequences of acknowledgment of all the evil done against the state that exists today. If one were to rise up and demand retribution for past injustices what would happen? There is a need not to upset the apple cart. There has to be an agreement that this is how things have been — and this is how things are going to function now. Now there may be some people who are impervious to the script. For example, on the farms and in isolated incidents. There is that dialectic: the need to ensure that

everything moves towards the center necessarily pushes some things into the margins. Slowly and ineffectually there is a movement in that direction.

**AD: A recent report points to the growing trend in the use of print and broadcast media in both the formal and informal educational sectors.<sup>11</sup> It is estimated that over 80 percent of South Africans have radio access, that 60 percent of South Africans listen to radio daily, and that 74 percent of these listeners are African. But 20 percent of rural dwellers have no radio access and 50 percent have no access to television. In October 1996, while you were chairperson of the Communications Task Group, you were quoted as saying that "when those who have been the wretched of the earth start taking control of the means of communication and information, this country will engage in a healing process". How does your work with ICASA contribute to that process?**

ML: We should be involved as a regulatory authority in broadcasting to ensure that voices are heard. There has never been a voluntary relaxation in political or cultural domination in any society but the fact that we have regulatory instruments is an important achievement. Radio is a particularly important tool in providing people with access to information and with the ability to communicate their needs. People today do have improved access to the broadcasting media. Women in rural areas, for example, are now announcing what it is that can save their lives. The South African Broadcasting Corporation has 19 radio stations and three television stations and reaches upwards of 20 million people daily. This is a huge number but it has not yet penetrated enough. We have reached the level of about 80 percent penetration for radio and 60 percent for television. There are many applications for broadcasting stations, and this is a grassroots movement. Everyday we deal with communities applying for special events licenses. The law that ensures greater

access to broadcasting media may not be perfect, and progress will be slow. But we have taken some positive steps.

**AD: How would you encourage reading and literature in South Africa?**

ML: There are two aspects to this problem: structural and educational. If you go to any black township of the republic, you will not see a single bookstore. Structurally there are reasons to explain why that is the case. The most basic is poverty. If you look at the fact that books are expensive and people are poor. This explains in part the absence of bookstores in townships. Something needs to happen in the publishing industry, as well, in order to make the price of books more accessible. The price of paper in South Africa is unparalleled, for instance.

The Minister of Arts and Culture, Ben Ngubane, is acutely aware of the dire circumstance of a lack of literary outlets for blacks in townships. He and the Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, have spoken on this. Yet for some reason there has not been any forward movement. People who are hungry cannot go to Sandton to buy books. But literacy also needs to become a drive, and this raises the question of education. Under apartheid, blacks were subjected to extremely inferior education. Now, there must be a drive to create a literate society and a reading culture.<sup>12</sup>

**AD: What are you working on now?**

ML: I'm working on a novel about a bodyguard.

**AD: A bodyguard! Well, a bodyguard would know people's secrets!**

ML: Yes, bodyguards know many secrets.

**AD: Well, perhaps we should end on this note of mystery.**

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Mandla Langa, *Tenderness of Blood*, Harare: Zimbabwe Publish-

ing House, 1987. All quotes from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Clingman, "Revolution and Reality: South African Fiction in the 1980s," in Martin Trump, ed., *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*, Ohio University Press, 1991, pp. 41-60.

<sup>3</sup> *A Rainbow on the Paper Sky*, London: Kliptown, 1989; *The Naked Song and Other Stories*, Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1996; *The Memory of Stones*, Cape Town: David Philip, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Gevisser, "Mandla Langa, author of *The Naked Song*," *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, August 30, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Mandla Langa won the *Drum* short story contest for "The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones" in 1980. *Drum* was an illustrated magazine founded at the beginning of the 1950s under the editorship of Anthony Sampson. Reflecting the spirited township culture of the 1950s, it also published investigative reports on farm labor conditions and other social problems. Its contributors became extremely well-known for their journalism, fiction or photography and included Peter Abrahams, Alex La Guma, Peter Magubane, Es'kia Mphahlele, Richard Rive and Can Themba. It continued publishing in the 1960s and later decades but never regained the vibrancy of the 1950s.

<sup>6</sup> Romare Beardon (1914-1988) was a major figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century art who worked mainly in collage. He was born near Charlotte, North Carolina but grew up in Harlem in New York in the 1930s and was based in New York for much of his career. His work often depicted jazz musicians but he returned to images of rural North Carolina for inspiration.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Trump, ed., *Rendering Things Visible*.

<sup>8</sup> Jonas Mosa Gwangwa is a jazz musician whose talent emerged in the 1950s in Orlando East in Soweto. He helped to establish and played with virtually every important band of the era, including the Jazz Epistles, the first South African band to record a long playing record. He spent many years in exile. Keorapetse Willy Kgositsile is an internationally acclaimed poet who has taught at universities in Africa and in the United States. In the early 1990s he was an Executive Member of the Congress of South African Writers.

<sup>9</sup> Baruch Hirson, "Not Pro-War, and Not Anti-War: Just Indifferent. South African Blacks in the Second World War," *Critique*, 20-21, 1987, 39-56.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Williamson, a former policeman, assassinated Ruth First in Maputo, Mozambique in 1982 and Jeanette Schoon and her six-year-old daughter Katryn in Lubango, Angola in 1984. All were killed by letter bombs. He was granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2000, although this decision is being challenged by relatives of the deceased individuals. Ruth First was married to Joe Slovo; Jeanette Schoon was married to political

activist Marius Schoon.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Tothill, *Media Education: South African Country Report*, Pretoria, South Africa: December 2000, 2-5.

<sup>12</sup> Tothill, *Media Education*, p. 3 notes that 18 percent of South Africans look at newspapers on a daily basis but that 35 percent of the population does not have access to them at all. The penetration of print media in rural areas is especially low. These figures are a reflection both of illiteracy, with some estimates of this as high as 46 percent, and aliteracy, meaning that many who can read do not.

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