

Writing constantly, almost compulsively, since his first collection of plays was published in 1980, Zakes Mda is something of a national treasure in South Africa. The son of A.P. Mda, a lawyer, anti-apartheid activist, and mentor of Nelson Mandela, it is possible to imagine that Zakes (born Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni Mda, "The One Who Brings the Rain,") was destined to become one of South Africa's strongest post-apartheid voices.

After A.P. was arrested for his political activities, Zakes followed his father into exile in present day Lesotho (then the Basotholand Protectorate) in 1964. He began writing plays in English when his move put him between languages—the Xhosa of his past life in South Africa and Sotho of his new life in Lesotho. After dabbling in careers in marketing, teaching, and banking, Zakes saw an ad for a Master of Fine Arts program in playwriting through Ohio University's School of Theater. He was already a published playwright with the critically acclaimed collection *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland and Other Plays* when he left to study in Ohio, receiving master's degrees in theater and mass communications.

Returning to Lesotho in 1985, Zakes worked in television and theater before leaving again to teach in the U.S. in 1991. On Christmas Day, alone in his Ohio house with his infant son, Zukile, Zakes sat at his first computer and began writing *Ways of Dying*, his first novel.

An irreverent look at the bleak state of life in South Africa's townships,

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*Ways of Dying* marked Zakes's transition from playwright to novelist. Since then, he has written five other novels, the most recent of which, *Cion*, was released in South Africa in April and the U.S. in August. The first of Zakes's novels to be set outside of South Africa, *Cion* shows America through the eyes of Toloki, a character Zakes

has revived from *Ways of Dying*. When Toloki, a professional mourner, tires of the routine deaths in South Africa, he travels to Athens, Ohio—the same university town where Zakes now teaches and lives—eventually finding his way into the lives and history of traditional quilt makers outside Athens.

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TDS: What is the balance for you these days, in terms of the time you spend in Ohio and in South Africa?

ZM: I spend roughly seven months in Ohio and five months in South Africa every year. When I'm in Ohio, I teach creative writing at Ohio University. In South Africa, I do a number of projects, including working as a dramaturge at The Market Theatre in Johannesburg and on some rural community development projects in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

TDS: How long have you been doing this split?

ZM: I've been doing it since 2002, the last five years or so.

TDS: You studied in Ohio in the 1980s. What made you decide to return in 2002?

ZM: I received two master's degrees from Ohio University in the early 1980s. Actually, I think I left for South Africa in 1984. I came back because I was offered a position as an Anglophone African Literature professor at Ohio University, and Athens was a town I knew and loved as a student.

Initially, I accepted the position as a visiting professor and planned to stay for only one year. I thought that I would return to Johannesburg, where I had been living previously and writing full-time. But my kids fell in love with Ohio, so I decided to extend my stay indefinitely and I took a permanent position as a professor in creative writing. Also during that first year, I discovered the story that I wanted to write, so part of the decision to stay was to be able to write that novel.

TDS: Is this *Cion*, the novel you're referring to?

ZM: Yes.

Today, Zakes is one of the few African writers who has found an audience outside his home country, perhaps making his fame within South Africa all the more prominent. He has won, among numerous awards, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa region and the 2005 Notable Books Award of the U.S. Library Association.

Impressively, he claims never to revise a first draft or title. Perhaps it is spontaneity of his craft that lends his writing its poetic readability.

I caught up with Zakes by telephone at his home in Ohio, right before his daughter's guitar lesson.  
Tracey D. Samuelson

TDS: Great, let's talk about *Cion* then, because you do something very interesting with it. You revive Toloki, the protagonist from *Ways of Dying*, and bring him from South Africa to Athens, Ohio. What did you see in Athens that made you want to bring Toloki over? In many ways, his journey mirrors your own.

ZM: Well, the novel is very metafictional—it tells how it came about and how it was constructed. In the first chapter, I explain why I brought this character to Ohio. It was suggested by a colleague at Ohio University when I was giving a lecture. He asked, "Have you ever thought of taking Toloki, the professional mourner from South Africa, to a different culture altogether, to see how he would function there?" I thought that was a wonderful idea.

At first, we thought of taking Toloki to Durham, England, where I lived for some time and worked as a writer-in-residence. But a new idea struck me—I thought, I should try to bring Toloki to where I am here in Athens and to the Ridges, which used to be a mental hospital in the 1800s. It's one of the old, famous, haunted places in America.

Then I found the village of Kilvert, where the WIN people live. WIN stands for white, Indian, Negro. They're a tri-racial community, living in the Appalachia about twenty miles from Athens. I thought Toloki would actually function very well in this area. I also thought it would be the best way to tell the story of this region through the eyes of this South African.

TDS: Many times, in fiction especially, the narrator's voice is not necessarily that of the author, but since you have made such a similar journey to Toloki and brought him to the town where you're living, are we able to draw a parallel between you and Toloki?

ZM: I don't think I've had a similar journey at all. The only thing in common is the same area, Southeast Ohio, but his life is quite different than mine. I came here to be a professor, to teach creative writing. He came for very different reasons. And he interacts with different people than I interact with. His experiences are completely different from mine. Well, I won't say completely, because I did go to Kilvert to research the story and I made him interact with some of the people that I met there. However, he interacts with them on his own terms, as a character very different from me. He lives with them there and he becomes one of them, participating in their activities and so on. But I also feature in the novel as a character who has created all the other characters. The character named the Sciolist in the novel is actually me, the author.

TDS: Do you still consider yourself an outsider in the States? You've said, 'Insiders usually take a lot of things for granted, whereas an outsider like myself is fascinated by ordinary things which then become a source of inspiration.' Do you still feel that way after all these years?

ZM: I'm just curious. Where did you get that?

TDS: It's from an interview on litnet.co.za with Damon Galgault. It's amazing what people can track down when they start doing research on you. I'll email you the link.

ZM: When I said that, I don't think that I was talking about being an insider or outsider in the U.S., but rather an insider or outsider in a community. A writer from New York would be an outsider in Kilvert, Ohio, and would see things with the eye of an outsider. When I went to Hermanus and wrote *The Whale Caller*, I was an outsider, even though Hermanus is in South Africa. As an outsider, I was able to observe things an insider takes for granted.

At the same time, many people in Athens who have read *Cion* have remarked on how it brings up things that they were not aware of, yet these are things that they live among everyday. Even the contemporary WIN community that I write about—many people don't know about the existence of these people, though they live only twenty miles from Athens.

I never expected that *Cion* would have that effect. I thought the things I was writing about were commonplace as far as Americans are concerned—that they were unremarkable, just day-to-day things. However, I found that, in fact, Americans find these things very strange and wonderful. They've never heard of these people, their culture, or history.

But I really wrote this book for my South African readers. They are always my target audience. I was trying to tell them that this is the America I've discovered and it is very different from the America that they think they know, that they've pieced together from television, movies, situation comedies, soap operas, and so on. This other America in *Cion* is very different from that.

So the question is, how did I discover this thing? The answer that I gave before, what I was saying in the quote you found, was that perhaps as a stranger, I'm able to see things that people who have been living here their whole life take for granted, things that to me are new and fresh. I'm able to rediscover the ordinary, in other words. I delve deeper; I question things that locals wouldn't think of looking into, and in the process I discover things that turn out to be new even

**“We have many more writers working on novels now than ever before in the history of South Africa.”**

to locals. I think that's what I was trying to say.

TDS: What is something in *Cion* that surprised your American readers? Can you give a specific example?

ZM: There are hundreds of things—for example, the very existence of the WIN community, or that there were white slaves in the 1840s.

When my book was edited by my publisher in New York, Picador, the editors wrote to me to say that, well, you have a character here who dies of polio in 1974. They didn't think that any reader would believe that. They thought that nobody died, or could die, of polio in America in 1974 because the U.S. had started vaccinating against polio decades earlier. They thought this was something that I had invented because of my ignorance of the society here.

So, I wrote back to say to them, well, in fact, that character actually did live here and he did die of polio in 1974. Because, you see, in this novel, I also have real-life people who lived here. James Flowers was the founder of the Kilvert Community Center and he died of polio in 1974.

This was a new discovery for this editor who lives in New York and for many other readers. Many people did not believe that in America, in this day and age, there would be people who would die of so-called "third-world diseases."

TDS: Do you think that, having spent so much time in the States now, you are able to see South Africa with the same fresh eyes? Not as an outsider obviously...

ZM: I believe I've always seen South Africa with fresh eyes, even when I was living there full-time. But this is because I trained myself, even in South Africa, to rediscover the ordinary, to look at things anew.

I spent many years living outside South Africa, even before I came to the U.S. I spent thirty years in exile, you know. I only went back to South Africa in 1994. And perhaps because I was away so long before, I was able to view South Africa with fresh eyes.

TDS: Sure.

ZM: I think that's the secret of my success—that I am able to rediscover what people take for granted, the ordinary, the day-to-day life.

TDS: How does daily life compare in the States versus in South Africa for you? Does the person that you are change at all depending on where you're living?

ZM: No, no, the person that I am cannot change, you know. The circumstances change. The life that I live in the U.S. is quite different from the life that I live in South Africa.

TDS: How so?

ZM: In South Africa, I live in a city, in Johannesburg, and it's a much more luxurious life. I have servants, a big house... And yet my life there is very hectic; there are always demands on my time. I speak publicly quite often and am very social, going out to the theater, and so on.

But in the States, I live a different kind of life. It's much more laid back. I don't have servants; I clean my house and do my own ironing. I teach at the University maybe twice a week. My kids grow up in a much more disciplined manner, knowing that they have to do things for themselves.

In the U.S., I can sit and reflect on things and write. I am able to do quite a bit of writing. So I just live a very simple, ordinary life, which is quite impossible for me in Johannesburg. No one knows me in the States, except those readers who have followed my work. I am therefore able to live a quiet life here, and devote my time to my writing, my children and my students. Everyone else leaves me alone; unlike in South Africa where people misguidedly regard me

as a “celebrity” and gossip columnists even comment on the fluctuations of my weight. Here in the U.S. I can be fat without any guilt because every other person is fat!

TDS: [laughs] Okay, let’s head in a different direction. You mentioned earlier about your projects, your theater work in South Africa, and also a rural development project that you’re working on in the Eastern Cape?

ZM: I work at the Market Theatre as their writer-in-residence and as a literary advisor for young playwrights. Occasionally I hold playwriting workshops for both the up-and-coming and established writers. Also, about seven years ago I founded a beekeeping collective—an apiary—for rural women. They harvest honey, bottle it, and take it to the market to sell.

I also work on HIV/AIDS education projects, particularly with the Southern Africa Multimedia AIDS Trust, where we use the various arts—literature, music, painting, and so on—as part of AIDS education.

TDS: There’s been a lot written recently about the state of post-apartheid literature in South Africa—some of it very positive, and some of it frustrated that things haven’t progressed more quickly, I guess. I was wondering if you had any thoughts on that.

ZM: Actually, I’m very happy with how things are developing. We have many more writers working on novels now than ever before in the history of South Africa. Many new writers, young writers, black writers, white writers, female writers...

What is important is that there is writing happening and new books are being published. The quality and what they are writing about are less important to me. I don’t think publishers would publish all these books if there wasn’t an audience for them. From the quantity, that’s where the quality will emerge. But there can never be any quality, imagine, if there is no writing happening at all.

TDS: And what about the States? Where do you see the U.S. now, in terms of accepting and enjoying African—especially South African—literature?

ZM: Well, unfortunately, I don’t think Americans are aware of the literary activity in South Africa. When Americans think of South African writing, they are usually just thinking of two writers—Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee, because

they are Nobel Prize winners. Maybe now, they also think a little bit of me or Andre Brink, but there is much more, so much more.

TDS: How can we change that?

ZM: I really don’t know. Americans are generally inward-looking people. They are not open to other cultures or cultural products from outside their own borders. You can’t find as much African music or art in America as you would in Europe, for instance. It’s just the nature of the beast.

TDS: And so how have you been able to make a name for yourself in the States? Because you are fairly well known in the U.S., as well as in South Africa.

ZM: Again, I don’t know; it just so happened that way. At first I thought that it was because I am partially based in the U.S., but I can’t say that because American publishers Picador and Farrar, Straus and Giroux published my work before I came to the U.S. in 2002. I don’t know. I’m not a critic, I’m just a writer.