

# Nthikeng Mohlele

*in conversation with Ronit Frenkel*

**Ronit Frenkel (RF):** *You have emerged as one of the most talented young South African writers over the last number of years, with your novels winning prizes and gaining a following of readers who eagerly await your next offering. Can you talk a bit about what this journey of 'becoming,' to use Michele Obama's phrase, has been like for you?*

**Nthikeng Mohlele (NM):** The journey has been unpredictable, fraught with artistic

and personal thrills as well as disappointments. Learning, too. One enters and participates in artistic disciplines as a novice, carves what is hopefully a niche, and commits to self-education and expression in a vast and often competitive realm of literature and writing. As to the nature and range of that becoming: a writer does not happen in isolation and therefore reflects dominant social and artistic tropes, past and present. The growth is multi-faceted – artistic, intellectual, spiritual –

and includes the development of certain moral sensitivities across time. Because literature demands rigor and exactitude, as do other art forms, the path to creative becoming was and is characterised by bouts of isolation, of a deliberate effort to develop and nurture deep and analytical thinking and ponderous reflection.

**RF:** *Turning to your books, I thought I would start by asking you about your writing process. How do you start off? With a theme, an idea or a character? Where do your ideas come from and how do they take shape?*

**NM:** I work on an emotive, colour palette and musical planes – and words become but an avenue to illuminate these aforesaid creative triggers. I never want to know in any measure of exhaustive or planned detail what my novels are or will become, for the conscious reason that predetermination of theme, character and plot lines stifle creative spontaneity. It would be pointless for me create within known restrictions and self-imposed boundaries — which is a recipe for dry and lethargic writing. This is a personal instinct/sentiment, of course, and varies from one artist to the next.

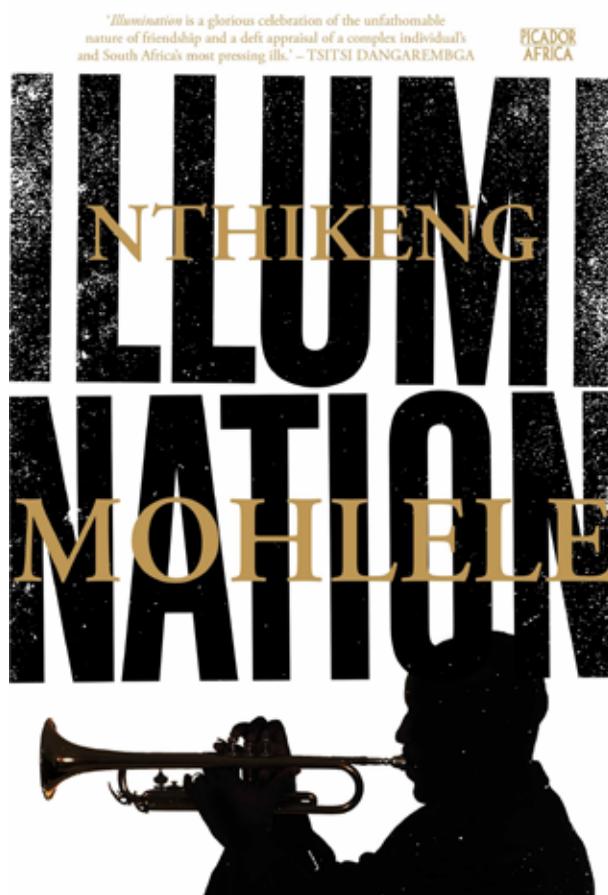
**RF:** *Can you walk me through some of the connections and differences between your six novels? Your first novel, *The Scent of Bliss* (2008) is fairly different to what you have written after. What was your intent here?*

**NM:** There are subtle connections and divergent distinctions among my books. The backbone and basic DNA that runs across all of them is of course thematic, but also a disposition to the philosophical. There is the obvious evolution of writing development in terms of maturation of craft, distillation of a narrative voice, and the human growth owing to an array of wisdoms that

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come with advancing age. The overarching intent is to produce competent literature, meaning the choices and omissions become secondary to that grand personal and artistic purpose. There are, of course, preoccupations with thematic focus areas, such as love and romance, human mortality, the sensual and erotic, power and the political, existentialism and history across all my novels, which are all written in the first-person except for *The Scent of Bliss*.

**RF:** *Small Things came next in 2013 and introduced music as a theme into your novels. It is also a 'city novel' in some ways. It is also beautifully tragic. What shifted your narrative voice here?*

**NM:** The shift in narrative voice resulted from the novel being overtly political in sense, but also being concerned with the specificity of place, of Johannesburg as a metropolis, a historic city, a melting pot of African and world cultures. Two tensions define this novel: that of past history and an embryonic South African future. There was a necessary complexity to the voice, in that the

narrative arc marks the end of an era, the collapse of the apartheid state and the aftermath and cold shadow of its policies.

**RF:** *Rusty Bell* was published only one year later and also seems to mark an acceleration in the pace of your writing – and you are certainly prolific. Your protagonist was once again a fairly tragic character. What is the connection between these two novels?

**NM:** The common thread is the often diametrical oppositions and tensions between societies and individuals. The question of personal agency versus societal norms and expectations illuminate levels of psychosis evident in the respective lead characters in the novels, which is not itself new in literature; it varies from one author to the next. Tragedy marks many aspects of human existence, as so ably demonstrated by the popularity and timelessness of Shakespeare, for instance. The same applies to Wole Soyinka's use of the Fourth Wall in relation to Yoruba mythology and tragedy and Sophocles in the realm of Greek tragedies.

**RF:** *Pleasure* (2016) is widely regarded not only as your masterpiece, but as a literary masterpiece in general (I must confess that it is one of my favourite books). It won The University of Johannesburg's Prize for writing in English and The K. Sello Duiker Memorial literary award. It was also long listed for The International Dublin literary award. What are your thoughts on this book and the attention it has garnered?

**NM:** I am most humbled by the attention the novel received. *Pleasure* is by far a major departure from my other fiction in that it is a conceptual novel. In other words, it frames, investigates and analyses various realms and manifestations of pleasure within a pocket of past and present time.

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The writing and development process demanded painstaking research and sober reflection, to anatomise World War 2 history and that of the Third Reich. My biased view is that it is a timeless and universal novel and can be read in multiple cultures and contexts. The book is important to me because it in many ways also answers the false argument that the demise of apartheid meant leaner thematic pickings for writers in the new South Africa.

**RF:** *Michael K* (2018) was written as a dialogue with J.M. Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*. How does this novel reflect some of the ideas from your other books and what was your intention in forming this dialogue with Coetzee?

**NM:** There are specific creative registers between *Michael K* and my other novels, namely the poetry and music motifs, exploration of history, and a strong interplay between narrative fiction and philosophy (as a system of thought and as an analytical tool to create multiple consciousness). The novel is intertextual by nature and design, an important systematic and intellectual marriage and counter dialogue between texts. This is because literature does not exist in a vacuum and texts of the future are in many ways texts of the past, precisely because there is nothing completely new in the universe. Art is similarly cyclical and repetitive, prone to multiple readings and audiences.

**RF:** Your 2019 book, *Illuminations*, has an interesting relationship to *Small Things* in terms of music. Was this an intentional circling around to write another layer onto the narrative or do you see it as departure from *Small Things*?

**NM:** It is another layer to *Small Things*. I wanted to write a proper jazz novel, an in-depth exploration of music as a theme and artistic discipline. This theme was only marginally touched on in *Small Things*.

**RF:** You are clearly a writer who is not afraid to take risks with your iconoclastic writing. What can we expect next from you?

**NM:** I have no idea. I am enjoying motion pictures and documentaries at the moment. I am catching up on reading and might pick up something worth exploring in the near or distant future. ■

## An extract from *Illumination* –

I am, when all the applause has died down, when the drum kit is disassembled and the guitars are encased when silence falls and blankets the auditoriums of performance halls, engulfed by bouts of loneliness. It takes my bands months, even years, to understand that I am not a talker, that I never have been. My life is in my head – its estimations, the violent waves that wash onto its beaches, its fine sands, its salty waters throwing seashells into view. The Listening Room is an extension of my musical instincts. It is also very much a space for reflection and meditation, a theatre upon whose stage my emotional spillages are let loose, resulting in the yanking of curtains off the rails and toothpick assaults on thighs. I come here to witness myself, like you peer at your facial reflection in still river waters. The room has also become a cathedral of transformations, wherein I come doubting this or that discovery and leave with convictions of stone. I allow my mind to burrow so deep into itself that some thoughts become dangerously fragmented, or crystallize into lighting strikes that set fire to life and art in equal measure.

There are days or late nights when I listen to silence, when not a single recording crosses my mind, when all I hear is a thudding heartbeat or, in extreme moments of focus, perspiration escaping pores and climbing skin hair on hot and musty evenings, when the determination to entrap and own silence is greater than the discomfort and irritation of summer heat. I, in that near-complete silence, listen to the pulse of the nation: marvel at its triumphs, frown at its cruelties, embrace its imperfections. Intent listening has its benefits: I hear, for instance, the minutest click of the metal hooks when a breeze brushes the curtains, boiling water seep into a teabag and the smallest tea leaves release their aroma and flavour into a tea cup with immediacy and colour, or my rather costly wristwatch tick in modest and underrated ways to chase, record and report on the time. I can hear, on days that I recover from a bout of influenza, pressure build and dissipate in both eardrums, or my nostrils (after insistent blowing) sound their nasal sirens as announcement of a return to good health.

It has been more than ten years' worth of thoughts in *The Listening Room*: thoughts related to music and art in general; reflections on history and nature; musings about the intercourse between migrating birds (how are their feelings and lusts worked out, the mathematical algorithms of desire while in motion to warmer climes?); ponderings about the nature and sanctity of great ideas (they do not belong in shopping malls or cemeteries, for instance; not in crowded city parks or in the heads of fighter pilots); about the perfect symmetry and timeless beauty of piano keys; and, wait, on the more existential side of things, I have thought about the many faces you wear in a lifetime. For, even if it's a known face, with improvements and deformities it might encounter in its life journey, it is not the same face, not the same expressions mark such a face, for faces have mastered countless masks and counter masks, pointed revelations in front of prosecutors, clergymen, rivals, would-be assassins, former lovers, sexual superiors, law-enforcers, photographers, admired grandparents or the babbling babies of strangers. There is a face for bowing to an appreciative audience after a magnetic trumpet solo, a face for pleading with an unyielding banker, a face and shyness (or is that shame?) to strangers we find appealing to a point of impure thoughts.

There are also millions of other faces, of course: ones to denote sympathy to people we hate, those upon whom we wish cancers or death by strangulation, or faces reserved for a father-in-law or those with a potential to betray our deepest secrets. There are faces to communicate terrible but not illegal things: foul breath, erections triggered by inappropriate conversations and persons in public spaces, certain low-key scandals of the marital and narcotic kind. Essentially, life is a series, a myriad of intoxicating and unfathomable transformations, from the moment you are eased down the birth canal through the many detours and afflictions that seem to emerge out of thin air. I am keenly aware of those faces I value above all the others: meditative, seductive, reclusive faces.

