

Date: 04/09/2007

Source: Department of Science and Technology

Title: SA: Mangena: BTA Anglo Platinum Short Story Competition

Address by Minister of Science and Technology Mosibudi Mangena at the BTA Anglo Platinum Short Story Competition

Master of proceedings

Ms Beulah Thumbadoo and Reading Activists from BTA

Representatives of Anglo Platinum

Entrants of the Short Story competition

Ladies and gentlemen

Reading and writing short stories has always captured my imagination. One short story of mine was published in Staffrider (1996) entitled "poisoned water". The story starts with a journey of returnees from exile and ends with these lines by Mxolisi: "I remember the many times we came back into the country. Our people went out of their way to pamper us with good food. They bought us clothes, gave us money and protected us from the enemy. We swam in them, like fish do in clean water. Now it seems the water is poisoned."

Ladies and gentlemen, the question raised in 'poisoned water' is related to what is happening today; to the questions raised by both Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon about the effects of capitalism and colonial power.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, in a chapter aptly entitled: 'The pitfalls of national consciousness', Fanon says this about our youth.

Normally, there is a certain homogeneity between the mental and material level of the members of any given society and the pleasures which that society create for itself. But in under-developed countries, young people have at their disposal leisure occupations designed for the youth of capitalist countries: detective novels, penny-in-the slot machines, sexy photographs, pornographic literature, films banned for those under sixteen, and above all alcohol.

In his works, Fanon speaks to a national consciousness. In the same vein, Steve Bantu Biko was part of a politically and socially conscious group who, together, conceptualised various ideas of national significance.

Writing about culture in 1971, Biko also notes that, "Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even of themselves. Other people have become authorities on all aspects of the African life"

Many modern African philosophers, such as Fanon, Ngugi wa Th'iongo, Biko, etc., are in agreement that native writers have undergone a mental decolonisation process, which began with a propensity to imitate the foreign culture, through a journey of self-discovery, to the final stage of self-assertiveness.

Fanon calls the final level, the fighting phase where the native now turns himself and herself into an awakener of the people. He notes that during this phase a great many men and women, who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now feel the need to speak to their nation; to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action; and compose that sentence, which expresses the heart of the people.

Thus, in an era replete with satellite television, cell phones, blackberries, play stations, radio, internet and a host of interactive software, it is heartening to be associated with the BTA or Anglo Platinum Short Story Competition. This project is giving a voice to thousands of ordinary South Africans, and in this way, promoting a wealth of local writing.

I understand that this competition has been running for the past 13 years, and this is the eighth time that Anglo Platinum Corporation is sponsoring it. The total prize money of R65 000 makes this competition one of the most lucrative in the region, and that may be one of the reasons more than 14 000 stories had been submitted from throughout Southern Africa since the inception of the competition.

As our host, Beulah Thumbadoo, has observed, the remarkable success of the BTA or Anglo Platinum Short Story Competition, and the enthusiasm displayed for the competition and other reading campaigns, is a clear indication that South Africa has a yearning for native reading matter. This is clearly demonstrated by the example set by the newspaper, Daily Sun. Although its possibility of success was initially met with scepticism, the paper is now printing in excess of 500 000 copies a day, and has a projected readership of over a million.

You and I have noted the growing number of magazines on our shelves. Indications are that this is a burgeoning market. It would indeed be most interesting to have statistics of its readership, whether they are faithful buyers of several other magazines or whether they also dip into the arena of books.

The question of who is reading what is of special importance. As a nation in the making, every item on our national developmental agenda is at risk if we cannot get the culture of reading right. Reading is one of the most powerful formative activities.

We need to become a nation of readers and writers, if we are to succeed in rebuilding this country. We can only be good engineers and scientists, doctors, economists, sociologists, and so on, if we can master language, and have a profound understanding of the written word.

Ladies and gentlemen, as 2007 also marks the 30th anniversary of Steve Biko's death at the hands of the apartheid state, Beulah has asked me to stray from my portfolio as the Minister of Science and Technology to consider and explore with you the central messages of Steve Biko's writings, and their relevance for writers today.

Steve Biko was a thinker and philosopher who shot from the tongue and the typewriter with words that were considered more threatening to the apartheid state than any that had been spoken before, and perhaps any that have been spoken since.

To be more pertinent, what advice would Steve Biko have given to the competition organisers who, I understand, are struggling to strike a balance between the original aims and objectives of the competition and their uptake?

The competition was intended to encourage black people to write their own stories for publication and reading by others in the black community, especially those who have been systematically denied the benefits of reading in the past. Before opening this competition to all our citizens, I learn the organisers want to ensure the attainment of this goal.

This will promote prolific writing, and hopefully lead to a situation where the more educated are once again writing for the poorly educated. This is but one challenge since the organisers of the competition, whose motto is, the "Right 2B Read", are also trying to make inroads into the aggressively pervasive Information Technology culture already alluded to.

I do not claim to have the answers to these difficult questions, but Biko believed it was inevitable that the diverse South African cultures should mutually influence each other.

More significantly, his view was that the culture of the indigenous majority, rather than that of the settler minority, should become the dominant national culture. His lament was that South Africa "looks like a province of Europe". The point Biko was making to us is that African culture is dynamic; it did not cease to evolve in 1652.

Thirteen years into democratic rule, can we proudly claim that we are on course in shaping our African culture in exactly the way he had predicted? Are the efforts of the many winners of this competition, who have, over the years, been speaking to this multicultural reality, finally paying off?

As an honour to Steve Biko's memory and life, this competition will be rising to the challenge if it can offer accolades to writing that is original, thought provoking, constructive and conducive to the kind of society that South Africans of all races are striving to build.

This is writing that does not seek affirmation from the value systems of foreign cultures. It is writing that unmistakably bears the hallmarks of a nation building consciousness that must preoccupy all South Africans.

And for supporting this "old fashioned" nation building process, I want to sincerely thank the sponsors, Anglo Platinum, for their perseverance in encouraging and supporting home-grown talent in the Southern Africa Region.

Human capital is the most precious asset of any nation, it is infinite, and has the capacity to recreate and reinvent itself. Stories from this competition need to see the light of day as popular books in homes, community libraries and schools. No effort must be spared in ensuring that some of the scripts are translated into documentaries and storylines for a yet-to-be-born Southern African film industry.

This is the only way we can ensure bigger rewards for the authors, sustain the popularity of their stories among our youth, and elevate African cultures to international levels.

Steve Biko would not have encouraged writing for its own sake. On the contrary, he would have encouraged writing that builds, educates, advances and elevates our nation to the highest pedestals of human endeavour.

I sincerely hope that the entrants and prospective winners of the short story competition today encompass both the spirit and idealism of Steve Biko's writing.

Finally, Ladies and gentlemen, my wish is to see in my lifetime a body of knowledge published in indigenous languages that brings back the pride of the black community. Writers today have all the support and liberties afforded by the Constitution to write, in Biko's words, whatever they like.

I encourage young writers to work with elders, engage in a dialogue to record the wisdoms that we so much need today. Like those writers who gave us hope during the dark years of colonialism, may today's authors create fiction that talks to social reality, global challenges, and most importantly, to a renaissance of Africa's consciousness.

May this support for creative writing not be seen exclusively as a competition where the best win, but as a way of giving prizes to a few at a time. Those whose works were not nominated should not think of themselves as the not-so-good writers.

They should see themselves as valuable contributors who make others run for their money. They have another chance of going back home to sharpen their writing skills.

Let me end, as a tribute to our writers, with a poem I wrote while in exile in Zimbabwe in 1993:

Learning to write

Learning to write
is to turn
sorcerer with words
to build mansions
of verbs and nouns
in the residence
of my mind

Learning to write
is to wallow
in ideas of good and evil
to create and destroy
to ensnare others
in webs of ecstasy or boredom.

Learning to write
is to invite
the loneliness of brooding hens
a nursing that knows no day or night
to court the pain and joy
of a messy birth, on paper

Mosibudi Mangena from the September/October 1993 workshop

Issued by: Department of Science and Technology
4 September 2007