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Poet writes herself out of grief

WritingThreeSixty attended the book launch of *I Am The Rose* by poet, artist, and feminist scholar Zulfa Abrahams on Tuesday the 2nd of December 2014 at the Artscape Opera Bar.

WritingThreeSixty: Is this your first book?

Zulfa: It is my first book. Last year this time, the WHEAT Trust published a book which was a collection of women's stories and at that time, I was collaborating with an Ethiopian poet, we are both PhD candidates in the Gender Studies Department at UWC, and what we did was a mix-media print with my sketches in the background and her poems in Amharic in front of them, and we put them with an Ethiopian border. When the WHEAT Trust launched their first book last year, they published four of those Ethiopian poems in their book and they asked me to do the cover art for the book. That is how the WHEAT Trust got to know who I am. After that I still dabbled in writing, but then mid-year last year, my dad took ill and he passed away. And in trying to grapple with the grief and trying to untangle myself from my father to make sense of the world, the world without my dad, I started writing poetry. I wrote the first poem, *Pappa Set Us Free* while he was ill and I asked him to go, to die, to set us free, because sitting at his bedside was one of the hardest things to do. When writing was not enough, I started painting. I kick-started this whole process where an untangling became an unravelling like painting my way out of grief. And I started unravelling and untangling the experience of growing up on the Cape Flats. The experience of being a young, Muslim woman in Cape Town. The experience of being a mother. The experience of being a wife, a divorcee, a lover. I just started writing. And I kept telling everybody I am going to publish my book even if I just publish one copy. It will be a self-published book. But one of the PhD candidates Celeste Fortuin, works with the WHEAT Trust and I spoke to her about this project I want to take on. She said to me she works with the WHEAT Trust and they are considering funding individual grantees instead of groups and organisations. So she said I should write a proposal and she would give the proposal to the board and see what they think. And I wrote the proposal and forgot about it. Then three months ago they contacted me and said they have selected me as a grantee and they want to fund the publication of my book, because they are launching a FemPress publication house and they would like me to be the first book that they publish. I was so chuffed. They said the one condition is that we launch the book by early December and this was two, three months ago.

WritingThreeSixty: What are your stories about, what are the central themes in your poetry collection and what is your writing process like?

Zulfa: This book unfolds from my youth to present. It is the unravelling of the self. The poem, *Shadow Boxing The Rose* is about the death of my mother, which was a pivotal moment for me because that is when I started telling stories using analogy. For me it is the most emotionally charged poem. I speak to my mother and say I will write you away just like I painted Pappa away. I poured myself into these pages. But for me this is a larger feminist activist project, to reclaim poetry and art so it does not just belong to the privileged and the educated. I want this book not to be a cerebral experience but a feeling experience. An expression of the self. An expression of me. A Steve Biko moment, *I write what I like*. I want what I write to resonate with people. To express the everyday. The beauty of everyday. For people to say, I know someone like that or I felt that. To tap into the human experience.

WritingThreeSixty: Your interest in identity politics, gender and embodiment and mixed media visual art, how has it influenced your writing and the kind of stories you tell?

Zulfa: I identify and position myself as a feminist; it shapes how I experience the world. But I did not want this book to be highly academic. I wanted to make it accessible for everybody. If the words do not speak to you the art will speak to you. I wanted it to be raw. I wanted to show my vulnerable self.

WritingThreeSixty: What writing advice do you have for other aspiring authors?

Zulfa: Write what you want. If you write about what you are passionate about and what you want to write about it shapes what you do.

WritingThreeSixty: Just as your work inspires others, which authors and/books have inspired your writing?

Zulfa: I resonate with Sylvia Plath, in terms of the darkness, wanting to shed herself from her husband. I also like young poets poetry, with that raw in your faceness of it. Street art inspires me and the feeling of freedom.

WritingThreeSixty: What is your greatest accomplishment?

Zulfa: My daughter. My dedication in my book is to my daughter Aminah Solomon. I will write for her. I will paint for her. She is the dream. I want to be able to show her that anything is possible, that you are enough as you are, and that you are valuable.

WritingThreeSixty: What is your next project?

Zulfa: Next year, I want to spread this in collaboration. I want to publish a book that consists of young women's stories and voices, a collaboration of poetry and art.

I Am The Rose is a collection of poetry and art by Zulfa Abrahams published by Fem Press, a publishing house of the WHEAT Trust (Women's Hope, Education and Training Trust).

For copies of *I Am The Rose* you can contact Zulfa directly via email at zlfabrahams@gmail.com. Her book is available from the WHEAT Trust in Wynberg for R100.

- Interview by Bronwyn Douman