

Interview

'They need to put that pen to paper': Interview with Susan Ntete

By Martina van Heerden

Dr Susan Ntete is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of the Western Cape. Recently, she published her first novel called *Ain't Over Till It's Ova*. WritingThreeSixty had an online interview with her to learn more about the novel.

WritingThreeSixty(W360): Please tell us a bit more about yourself

Susan Ntete (SN): I'm a proudly black woman, a mother to one daughter and grandmother to three beautiful grandchildren. I was born and raised in East London, in the Eastern Cape, and am a teacher by profession – have taught in both high school and at university levels. I teach in order to bring about change.

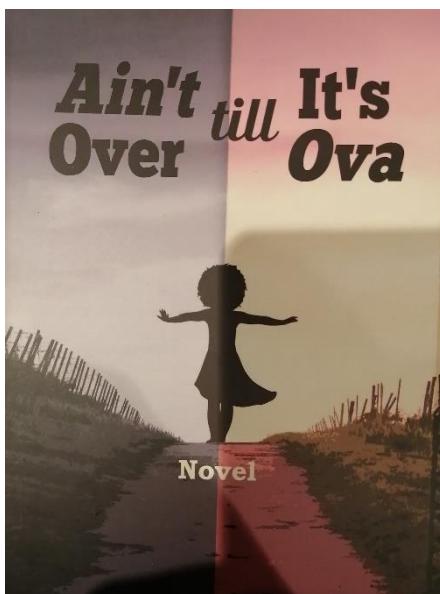
W360: Please tell us a bit more about your novel, *Ain't Over Till It's Ova* (i.e. what is the basic premise of the novel)

SN: The book was/is informed by the findings of my research (Ntete 2008) which suggests a chicken and egg relationship between poverty and under-achievement among township learners. Based on these findings I took it upon myself to find a creative way by which to conscientise learners about the implications of this relationship, and the role each learner could play in ensuring they don't become unwitting victims. Because prevention is at the heart of the project, it was important to reach out to township youth (young women in

particular) at the earliest point possible (hopefully before they become parents themselves and start perpetuating the afore-mentioned vicious cycle). Grades 11 and 12 learners then became my target readership and/or audience.

W360: What are some of the themes your novel touches on?

SN: Through this novel students are compelled to confront the white elephant in the room, i.e. poverty and the ways in which this is perpetuated by the learners themselves (attitudes, personalities, actions, etc.) family dynamics (e.g. dysfunctional families, poor parenting skills, etc.), as well as the environment. Besides



the pivotal role of poverty this gendered novel exposes learners to numerous social issues which they confront in their daily lives, starting from individual factors (the 'tragic flaw'), familial (parenting skills, child-headed homes, dysfunction, etc.) and societal concerns (e.g. patriarchy, sexism, etc.); all of which tend to work (in particular) against those coming from impoverished backgrounds. The book is essentially a message of hope to this kind of learner, and is meant to inspire and motivate them to never give up.

W360: What motivated/inspired you to write the novel?

SN: My experiences as a lecturer teaching academic literacies/communication skills to incoming university students – I used to experience a sense of helplessness because by the time students come to me there's very little I can do to help them overcome their debilitating upbringing so that they may be better able to cope with academic demands. The serious time constraints under which we work (i.e. I have less than 2 full days within which to teach an entire module), the advanced nature of our content, etc. are at the heart of the low throughput rate. Needless to say the situation has huge implication for the individual learner, the family investing in the hope of a better future, and the country as a whole.

Based on my concern with incoming students' state of readiness to navigate the academic environment it became critical for me to adopt a proactive approach, by trying to reach out to learners while still in the high school environment. It is therefore by bridging the gap and smoothing the transition between high school and tertiary education that I hope to improve students' chances of success.

I therefore needed to go beyond the wish to merely instil a love of reading in learners (which is undeniably a necessary and useful step), and to find creative means by which to achieve a much more serious and ambitious goal (that of conscientising and alerting black learners to the long term impact of those factors associated with impeding their success, e.g. trans-generational and/or chronic poverty, etc.); as suggested by my doctoral project.

This I try to achieve by drawing learners' attention to the character of Thimna, a teenager confronted by a number of challenges as she navigates her way through different

aspects of life. These are aspects which the majority of learners can also identify with; and so I use the fictitious 'Thimna's experiences' as an opportunity to encourage self-reflection. Focusing on 'somebody else's' experiences makes it 'safe' for the class to discuss relevant topics that would otherwise have been uncomfortable. The self-reflection, robust debate and discussion which emanate from these not only teach them critical thinking skills – but also present teachers with opportunities to teach creative writing.

[Moreover] There was and still is a call for black authors within SA, to write specifically for black learners, and a further demand for black female protagonists that black learners could identify with, and someone they could try and emulate ... Although the proposed idea makes perfect sense to me I am of the opinion that black learners first need to understand what it is about them that prevents them from succeeding. Failure on our part to help them understand this in my opinion further widens the gap between the haves and have nots, because the have nots will continue to lack the inclination and skills necessary for them to fight their way out of poverty.

W360: What are some of the challenges you experienced in writing the book?

SN: Had I known from the beginning what the publishing process entailed I would have handled things differently – I wasn't the easiest person (for the publishing team) to work with, because I kept chopping and changing. Finding some kind of balance between my work commitments and the writing was another challenge. In future I would definitely invest more time in my writing before submitting my work for publication.

W360: Are you busy with another book at the moment?

SN: Not really – I do have a few ideas that I'm toying with in my head, but do not have anything concrete yet.

W360: If people are interested in obtaining your novel, how can they go about getting it?

SN: It is a self-published book so I'm responsible for marketing and selling it, and that's not an easy thing to do. I'm currently carrying copies in the boot of my car while a second publishing house assesses my novel to determine its suitability for Grades 11 and 12 consumption. As soon as it is approved it will be more widely-distributed.

W360: Do you have any advice for other aspiring writers?

SN: They need to put that pen to paper because that is the only way they will have something to work with and refine. They need to get started ...

Please contact Susan Ntete at sntete@uwc.ac.za if you would like to obtain a copy of her novel.