

Interview

“‘Writing found me’ - a conversation with Jolyn Philips”

I met Jolyn Philips (JP) in an office filled with books, colourful rugs and little painted guinea fowls handcrafted out of pinecones. With a cup of tea at hand, Jolyn and I spoke about her childhood in the fishing town of Gaansbaai. We spoke about what it was like to leave her beloved hometown and move to Cape Town – a place she had never been to, a place filled with mystery and excitement as she left home to pursue her dream. Jolyn registered at The University of the Western Cape (UWC) and now, many years later, she is one of UWC's many success stories having just published her first book, a collection of short stories titled, *TjiengTjangTjerries*.



Author Jolyn Philips proudly holding her newly launched book

Jolyn does not like to call herself an author; the term makes her feel uncomfortable. It was her supervisor, she says, who saw

something in her that she, herself, could not understand. As Jolyn speaks, it is as if a light is shining within her and I see what her supervisor is talking about. When she speaks about writing, her entire face and demeanour changes and she emanates calmness and maturity. Jolyn never saw herself as a writer. She was just a young girl from Gaansbaai who had big dreams but never thought they would turn into reality.

Jolyn, a 2014 Mandela Rhodes scholar, is not just a writer, she is a singer too. She often sings at UWC graduations and this year the

newly-appointed rector, Tyron Pretorius gave her multiple shout outs, cementing his admiration for the singer. As Jolyn sang renditions of 'I Dreamed a Dream' from *Les Misérables* and 'There's a Place for Us' from *West Side Story*, the crowds watched and listened in silence to her powerful voice as it harmonized perfectly with the joyous celebration.

When Jolyn speaks about home, her body language changes – home has a special meaning for her. It grounds her; even though, when she was studying at UWC, she could only afford to go home once or twice a year. Money was extremely tight and as much as Jolyn missed her parents she had to stay at university. It was this longing for home that inspired her book - she missed home so much that she began to write about it and so *TjiengTjangTjerries* was born.

KN: How did you write this book? Talk to me about the characters.

JP: I joined Meg's (Meg van der Merwe) creative writing group when I was in my third year of my BA degree and so my writing journey began. I had to interview someone from home, and there was this sort of disconnect with me and the people at home. So when I couldn't go home I started to imagine home, I started to miss it. I started writing about it, about the place and the people. I would sometimes go to places where there was sea, somewhere that felt like home and I felt that I belonged. This wasn't my place, but I write from that truth, I didn't belong here. There was a disconnect. I wasn't the person I was when I left. The characters really wrote themselves; I came with all the memories. I was being taught fiction at the time so that also shaped my writing. I was invested (in this character), I gave it clothes, a name, history and realised that the part that was missing was the character's story. It took me a long time to figure it out, it took me about 4 years to discover the character, but I eventually did. I just hope that I did not become the 'outsider' by writing about the 'inside'.



Jolyn talking about the characters in her book

KN: How has your upbringing in Gaansbaai influenced your writing?

JP: I had a wonderful childhood; I have a lot of mothers and fathers! You grow up with a lot of people around you. I think that childhood is still within me, because I had such a wonderful imagination, I remember my dad coming home from the factory at 5 and playing games like *skopbokkie* or *tol*. I remember that parts, or maybe I'm just being nostalgic, and we played hide and seek and safety was not an issue. I grew up with such a lush environment: trees and the sea. I only realised I missed those things when I came up to Cape Town. I grew up completely Afrikaans. I went to a high school in Genadendal and, you know, you go through things at high school. It was the first time I engaged with language, art and singing. I actually almost failed matric and my teacher supported me. I did well, I passed and applied for journalism; writing was already seeping through. I was always a hard worker; I had to pay my own school fees. My mom is a storyteller, a strong woman. I had to find out her history. My mom

and dad grew up as orphans so they did not know their parents; it wasn't something we ever spoke about. So I had to dig and do research – this influenced my writing process.

KN: You speak a lot about 'home' and I can see that it means a lot to you. Do you have a sense of home when you come here (UWC)?

JP: I do, it gives me sense of purpose and belonging, if all else fails in Cape Town I know I can come here [to UWC]; the people know me here and they are kind to me. There have been so many people here at UWC who shaped me, besides my supervisor Meg van der Merwe. Mrs Roos (one of the English department secretaries) was one of my first mentors and she taught me "treat other people as you would yourself" and I've taken that with me, she was one of the beginning people. She saw that I was looking for work and empowered me, she gave me work and she refused for me to feel sorry for myself. She always said "Jolyn, wear what you want" and so my journey here began and now I am who I'm supposed to be. Mentors, teachers, and opportunities were given to me and there must be a reason why I am still here; I've found a home here.



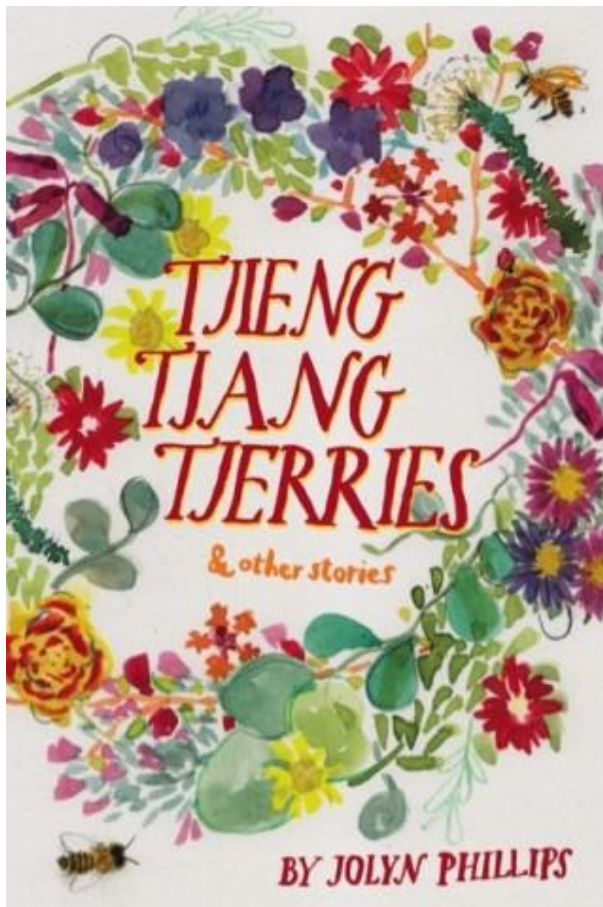
Jolyn speaking about UWC and home

KN: How did you feel when the book was published, when you held the first copy?

JP: Meg actually held the first copy. The cover artist, Carla Kreuser, would

send me little colours, and ideas and she took these ideas and came up with this (pictured below), she drew from the stories – I did not realise how much of the landscape was in this book. We're not just fish, sea and people. We are quite famous for our fynbos;

it really shaped a lot of the characters' memories, too. Fynbos is always around. The fynbos can situate you in a place, and if you smell a certain type then you know you are in a certain part of Gaansbaai. Like if you see and smell a protea, they just don't grow just anywhere! When I go home I switch off completely! I just make no sense. I can't speak. They just know I like being home, there's nothing quite like 'home' to bring you back to your senses and remind you who you are and how far you've come, it humbles you.



The cover of TjiengTjangTjerries

The book was chosen to be on a list called the 'Home Brew' at Exclusive Books, I'll be going to Johannesburg for the Home Brew festival. I will be going to the Franschhoek Literary Festival, where my publishers found me last year. I'll be attending the McGregor festival, the open book festival but what I'm most

excited about is taking the book home! My cousin told me that someone wrote a feature about me in *Die Son* and I thought that was the best way to introduce me to the people at home – but I'm very excited about the home launch.

KN: What are you working on at the moment?

JP: I am currently working on my PhD in the Education faculty. I'm doing language learning because I feel that story telling has had

such a huge impact on my learning and development and has gotten me to this place, not just success but for me, as a person. If I can come up with something that can be used by other teachers to teach those learners what I've learned, I want to change people's lives through that process. I would also (for my own selfish reasons) love to travel and see the world at least once and actually get on a plane... for the first time!

KN: What advice do you have for any aspiring creative writers?

JP: If you want to write, just write. I read somewhere that 'for the cheapest form of art all you need is a pen and paper' – while this is true, writing is time consuming; you'll feel like an exhausted mother after nightshift with her new born. You will be anxious, worried and your writing goes through the terrible twos – if you have experienced this and or felt like this then you are on the right path.

Writing came at a time of healing; looking back, if I could sketch myself, it was as if my skin was coming apart, the words hung loose from my body until I could face the truth and pick up the words. Those words possessed everything that kept me from being present and from being able to forgive and make new possibilities out of them. And finally, don't force yourself to write in a specific form; write short stories novels or poems, just write your truth and your stories will mould itself into the shape it needs to be.

For more information on *TjiengTjangTjerries and other stories* 2016 visit <http://www.modjajibooks.co.za/titles/tjieng-tjang-tjerries-and-other-stories/> and to purchase the book visit Excusive Books.

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