An Interview with Elana Bregin

Siphokazi Koyana

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Abstract
Elana Bregin, recipient of the FNB Vita/English Academy Percy Fitzpatrick Prize for youth literature in 2000, was interviewed by Siphokazi Koyana and Rosemary Gray (University of Pretoria) in December 2001. This multi-talented author, freelance writer, editor and lecturer was born in Johannesburg in 1954. She completed her BA at the University of the Witwatersrand and her MA in English at the University of Natal in Durban, where she currently resides. Her dissertation topic, 'Representations of the Bushmen [San]' reveals her deep-seated and lasting concern for the plight of the people in the country of her birth, a concern which is consistently manifest in her novels to date (The KayaBoeties [1989], The Red-haired Khumalo [1994], The Boy from the Other Side [1992], The Slayer of Shadows [1998]), as well as in her stories for younger age-groups (The Magical Bicycle, A School for Amos, and 'Now We Are Free' — the latter published by Bloomsbury in a prestigious anthology entitled Dare to be Different (1999) commissioned by Amnesty International).
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The Slayer of Shadows, for which Bregin won the FNB Vita/English Academy Award, is a darkly disturbing book which is at the same time also an imaginatively transformative text. Bregin represents a wasteland that appears at times both despairingly futuristic and medievally superstitious, but also recognisably located in the South African present, in those forgotten places where change has not reached, and life has become a battle for survival. Her richly lyrical text skilfully combines elements of autobiography, fantasy, fable, and magical realism to present a powerful story which traces the coming of age of a young girl in the lawless Jungle.

As the questions which follow demonstrate, Elana is disarmingly honest and even harshly self-aware. Her ability to confront the ‘self’ without pretence and equivocation, enables her to understand and to empathise with the ‘other’ in a rare and inimitable manner. This is a writer who indeed dares to be different,
tackling contemporary societal issues with humour, goodwill and a sure sense of mission.

SK & RG To what extent did the winning of the English Academy of Southern Africa's Percy Fitzpatrick Award for children's literature inject new life into your enthusiasm as a writer? Has this prize helped to rekindle your 'courage' to write.

EB I'd better just clarify that the category that the Award was given in was youth literature, not children's. I really hate that 'children's' label, since it pigeonholes me and makes it very difficult for me to be taken seriously in other connections. I also have to stress that distinction because The Slayer of Shadows, with its harsh subject matter, is absolutely not suitable for juniors. Its aimed at the 'mature young adult', which is a very different category from children's. And yes, winning the Award has definitely made a difference to my inspiration (and courage) levels. Writing had, for me, become a very disheartening exercise, for all sorts of reasons, and I'd virtually given up on it. That recognition of worth that the Award implies rekindled the spark in the most amazing way. One of the problems with writing is that its such a lonely business. Unlike with acting, you seldom have access to your audience's response. Most of the time, you get no feedback at all (except when something you've said has caused negative reaction). So you tend to imagine that you're writing into a dark and empty theatre, and the question then becomes — why bother? That's why writing awards are such a vital incentive — and its such a pity that a country like ours has so few of them.

SK & RG Your texts do not patronise the young reader by presenting any oversimple explanations of complex and violent realities; instead they provide a context for exploring the challenging issue of evil and the potential for individual and communal survival and even renewal. What makes it so easy for you to write for young adults? Do you perhaps have children of your own who keep you in tune with the goings on in the world of young adults?

EB No, I don't have children of my own, so maybe its just a case of my own 'arrested development'! I must own that I seldom consciously set out intending to write for a particular age group. My stories tend to find their own voice, and a lot of the time, that seems to be young adult. I think the lovely thing about this category is its versatility. They are still children in many ways but also beginning to engage with the universal human themes and life dramas that we regard as 'adult', so they respond well to innovative approaches that tap into that mix of innocence, angst and maturity. I like the challenge of
broaching quite strong topics in a way that will strike chords with them — for example by using humour, adventure or fantasy.

SK & RG Since you use a lot of humour in your writing, what have you learnt about South African humour? What makes young South Africans laugh? Is their humour unique or different from that of their peers elsewhere?

EB I think young South Africans have a delicious sense of humour. They love slapstick humour as all children do, but they also appreciate naughty irony, the kind that subverts the ‘rules’ and draws attention to the inherent ridiculousness of real situations/behaviour. South African adult humour is, to me, much less interesting. Our national mascot seems to be the loveable buffoon, and our comedy is too often portrayed at the level of parody rather than wit. The most enjoyable kind of comedy is the kind that makes you laugh with recognition. I think this is universally true, and applies to both adults and young adults.

SK & RG The quality of your writing is such that the ‘unspeakable’ events are described in a way that does not sensationalise nor trivialise the brutalities experienced by the child and her Shadow-slayer. Yet, you were once accused of ‘indoctrinating’ the innocent minds of children, and the prize-winning The Slayer of Shadows was regarded (by some) as too advanced for children (for example, Isn’t the sexual relationship between Marinda and Zach incestuous?). Do you think that your subject matter is perhaps too ‘real’ or is it just that polite society prefers not to confront that reality?

EB Yes, I do seem to have the knack of attracting controversy! The accusation of indoctrination that you mention was not something I could take seriously, since it was made by a prejudiced right-winger who objected to my irreverent treatment, in a story, of the AWB — SA’s fascist right-wing armed resistance movement.

As for Slayer of Shadows being too advanced for children, I couldn’t agree more. I must stress again that it was never intended for children, but for mature readers. And the cover blurb I think makes this clear. That aside, the question of whether young readers should be sheltered from the ‘too real’ realities of life is a pretty thorny one. I personally think you’re not doing anybody any favours by pretending that children live in an ‘innocent’ world. Many of them are facing some pretty unspeakable situations in their own lives. And rather than editing these out, it’s far more valuable for stories to depict them honestly and offer a model of how to cope with them better.
One of the judges of a young adult competition once pointed out that ‘authors seem nervous of confronting serious issues, forgetting that children face or see the results of serious issues in their everyday lives’. This is certainly true of SA, with its terrifyingly high child rape/incest statistics, which indicate that huge numbers of ‘children’ have experienced these traumas for themselves. I deliberately chose not to gloss over the rape scene in *Slayer of Shadows*, because the frequency of rape in this country and the lack of trauma support means that rape is too often treated as nothing — just something boys do and girls must put up with. Without being graphic in the depiction, I wanted to look honestly at the deep psychic damage that rape does. The girl in the story takes us through the emotions that many rape victims go through, but so often can’t talk about. The point of that episode is that her choice in the end is life-affirming, not hopeless or destructive.

**SK & RG** *To what extent do you think your harshest critics are wrestling with the dichotomy between the real and the fictional? Can this be attributed to confusing the mimetic with the diegetic mode of representation?*

**EB** Yes, I think that that reality/fantasy overlap is problematic for those who like their narrative in labelled boxes. Westerners are particularly category-driven. African culture seems to have a much more intuitive understanding of the overlap between the symbolic and real elements of life, and of the way in which the seen and unseen worlds, the natural and supernatural feed into each other. Which is possibly why black readers who encounter the book have responded so positively, because it gels more with their world-view. There’s also something about this kind of ‘real-but-not-real’ writing that touches the nerve. We’re fairly inured to the graphic violence in our news reports. We’ve learned to switch off to it to some extent. But when you dress up that reality in different clothing and take it out of its familiar setting, it somehow looks a lot more shocking.

The choice of mimetic over diegetic was an involuntary rather than intentional one. There was just no way that I could have written this story in ‘real’ mode. At the time of writing, we were so saturated with violence. The whole country seemed to be full of burning shacks and traumatised refugees with unspeakable stories to tell. My dilemma was, how does one make a palatable story of such literal suffering? In a world where the abnormal has become the norm, where atrocity has lost its shock value, how do you prick feeling back into the blunted nerves? How do you convey, without being banal or trite, that
incredible resilience of spirit that enables so many survivors of trauma to carry their humanity, not their monstrosity, forward into the future?

SK & RG  What was it about your own childhood background that sensitised you to the racism in your environment, and how did you deal with such racism then?

EB  I think I was quite an outsider myself, and so tended to identify naturally with the underdog rather than the in-group. As a child, I was always aware of the wrongness of the talk I heard around me and the humiliating treatment that I saw being meted out to people who were the ‘wrong’ colour. But it never occurred to me that there was anything I could do about it — until I went to university and got woken up to student politics. The only time I can remember being in a situation of having to physically stand up for someone was late one night when a boyfriend and I came across a small black newspaper seller being bullied by two burly white men (who I think were plainclothes policemen). I loudly shouted at them to leave him alone and sent my boyfriend (who was a Karate black belt) to intervene. At which point they released the newspaper seller and beat my boyfriend to a pulp instead. My guilt was almost as painful as his concussion. That was the last time I sent someone in to do my fighting for me.

SK & RG  Your richly lyrical text skilfully combines elements of autobiography, fantasy, fable and magical realism to present a powerful story which traces the coming of age of a young girl in a lawless jungle. One of the remarkable features of the text is the way you graphically articulate the effects of trauma as the narrative gradually fills in the past that the child is attempting to forget. What kind of research goes into writing a book such as The Slayer of Shadows? For example, how do you know the intimate details of ghetto life, assuming you’ve never lived in one?

EB  Most of the crucial research that is done for a book like The Slayer of Shadows happens long before I ever think of writing such a story. I never feel comfortable about barging into other people’s painful lives as a ‘research tourist’, so I tend to write about places, people and events that I’m already familiar with and have internalised as part of my ‘own’ life experience. That wounding old ‘inauthentic voice’ charge that used to be hurled at white writers who imagined they could write about black lives without ever having been into a township was a valid challenge. But I don’t believe that one can ever write convincingly about a place — real or metaphorical — that one has
not ‘been into’ in the fullest sense of the words — both physically and emotionally.

**SK & RG** *Most of your writing shows an intuitive ability to feel for and think like ‘the other’. To what do you attribute this capacity to place yourself in the shoes of [an]other?*

**EB** I think that as a writer, as with an actor, you have to be able to put yourself in the shoes of another — more than this, to slip into their skin. The act of writing is an empathic act. Its that empathy that enables us to transcend our limited and narrow little lives and think ourselves into the lives of others. What we are drawn to write about is usually what we can strongly identify with. Research may provide the descriptive details. But empathy is the train ride that takes you into the heart of the country.

**SK & RG** *Has the new dispensation in SA (that is, the post-apartheid era) made story telling more or less difficult for you?*

**EB** Both. Easier in the sense that you have the freedom now to leave social reality behind for a while and explore a whole range of subject matter, from the trivial to the sublime, without feeling that you are turning your back on the cause. More difficult in the sense that during apartheid, you never had to wonder what you should write about, or what you were trying to achieve with your writing. Your writing had an urgency and purpose, because it was linked to larger things. The mere fact that you had a voice in a country where so many didn’t, meant that you were almost obliged to use it. Now, its all reversed. The questions to be wrestled with are how relevant my white voice is in the SA of now and what of value do I, as a white South African, have to contribute to this multi-cultural moment.

It’s also dismaying to realise that my whole history of experience is now out of date. For instance, the experiences that SA kids have in their multi-cultural classrooms today, and the issues that they are facing are completely different from the ones that I grew up with. So I can no longer just complacently rely on my own childhood memories for background. They are the relic of a past that is no more. There’s been so much change so quickly, and because we’re moving with it, we tend not to be aware of the really significant things that are happening around us. When you’re living your history, you can’t always get the necessary perspective to write it.

**SK & RG** *Do you regard The Slayer of Shadows as a post-apartheid text and, if so, why?*
I think it depends on your definition of post-apartheid. If you see it in terms of a time-line, then technically it qualifies. But if you mean do I see it in terms of an indictment on the system, then only indirectly. What it examines is the brutal aftermath of a brutal system. But its not just apartheid itself that’s in the dock here. It’s the inhumanity of the brutalised — the powerful, conscienceless scavengers who gorge themselves on the weakness and misery of others.

To what extent do you see The KayaBoeties as an early attempt to ‘write back’ on behalf of teenage girls?

Not much. Because that wasn’t my conscious intention when I started writing it. My primary concern in KayaBoeties was to show the ugliness of racism to teenagers of specifically the male variety (since they were the worst offenders) who weren’t in the least interested in hearing it — unless I could be cunning and use humour to disarm them. The use of a female voice, Charlie, as the central protagonist was not a conscious decision to ‘write back’ in a gender sense, but more a natural development of the need to have a dissenting voice to challenge the male smugness. It was only when the story got going, that I began to relish Charlie’s outspokenness more and more, and to feel I was getting my revenge for all my own long-suffering years at the receiving end of young male arrogance. So I suppose in that sense, yes, it was a ‘talking back’.

I must add that re-reading the book recently, I found it a wincing experience. Pecker’s blunt diatribes and his tendency to use ‘those words’ (as Charlie would say) are a lot more shocking and uncomfortable to encounter now, than at the time of writing, when we were so habituated to them. And I was very struck by the portrayal of Sam, the black protagonist, as the virtually voiceless victim, who needs Charlie to speak for him. It was a sobering reminder of the long road we’ve travelled since 1989 when the book was written.

Would you regard The Red-haired Khumalo as protest or prophetic or both?

Red-haired Khumalo was not so much prophetic or protest as ironic commentary — an attempt to capture, with humour, the ironies of a particular moment that was happening around me, when the political was moving faster than individuals could keep up with. People who had been kept complete strangers to each other for decades, who were not allowed to ‘mix’ in any form, were suddenly expected to drop the barriers and interact on equal terms. The result was the ‘I’m
all for the new SA, but not in my living room’ syndrome, which is what the white girl in the story epitomises.

**SK & RG** *How do you go about the process of writing a book, given that you do other kinds of work, such as teaching? In other words, when do you find the time to write, or is writing your primary activity?*

**EB** No, alas — earning a living is my primary activity, which leaves not nearly enough energy/time over for writing. Its seems to get more and more difficult, as the years swirl by, to set aside the extended blocks of time needed for getting all those words out in a flowing and continuous motion. I usually try and start new projects in the Christmas break, and then frantically work away to sketch out as much of the first draft as I can. Once the skeleton is down, its easier to have reference points to go back to after the treadmill has claimed you again. I think the worst thing you can do to any writer, is yank them away from their PCs just when inspiration is in full flood and the story is eloquently unfolding itself. Once that continuity is broken, it can be a real battle to get back into the ‘skin’ of the novel again. Sometimes, if the interruption is too prolonged, you never do get back. The story is gone forever.

**SK & RG** *If, as you commented in your speech for the International Research Society for Children’s Literature Conference in August 2001, you are like Bach, who had to try to avoid tripping over ideas that came to him, how selective do you find you have to be about the ‘stories [that] leap at you from every corner’?*

**EB** I usually find that most of the stories that leap are just flashes in the pan. The one that is viable is the one that takes root without conscious effort, the one that writes itself in your head when you’re busy doing other things, like the shopping and the driving and the dishes. I find the mechanics of writing an exhausting process, so I tend to carry my stories around for as long as possible, until I’m sure that they’re worth setting down. I seldom start a book sitting formally at my word processor. The real work of writing, for me happens in the head, not the hand.

**SK & RG** *With the incredible richness of SA life and the stories it provokes, have you considered writing short stories instead of novels?*

**EB** I have written the odd short story for both local and UK anthologies. It’s a genre I enjoy very much. The shorter format suits my restless attention span and is easier to fit in between other demands. But publishers tell me that short story collections are hard to sell, so I
haven't really focused on that in any serious way. Most of the writing that I do these days is very adult, and includes academic articles, journalism, travel writing, and so on.

**SK & RG** Which writers have had the most influence on your own writing?

**EB** I've always read so voraciously that it's hard to pinpoint which writers in particular helped to form my style. I've always been a big fan of the so-called science fiction/fantasy writers, like Ursula Le Guin, Frank Herbert, Tolkien, Ray Bradbury and so on. Books like *Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Silver Locusts*, *Dune*, *Lord of the Rings*, are often denigrated as escapist and therefore 'not real literature' — but in fact they are often very profound. They have such an intricate understanding of the human condition and I admire beyond words their realistic and beautiful portrayals of invented worlds to comment on our own. Closer to home, the stories of the *Drum* writers of the 1950s, like Can Themba, Henry Nxumalo, Richard Rive, Nat Nakasa and Casey Motsitsi are among my favourites. Despite their uneven technical skill, and their tragically short lifespans (most of them fell victim to violent death of one kind or another) I think they are among the most original, interesting and thought-provoking voices to emerge in this country, with an incredible talent for conjuring up the world and times they lived in. Of course our Booker prize winner, J.M. Coetzee must go on the list, as well as the much-criticised Alan Paton, who came closest of all to writing the Great South African story of his time — *Cry the Beloved Country* — the only South African book that I can think of that, with all its flaws, transcended its time and space and captured the imagination of the world.

**SK & RG** What do you see as the challenges facing South African writers in the new millennium?

**EB** To write the stories of now, that capture new millennium South Africa in all its multi-faceted complexity. No easy task. And of course, to produce the big one — The Ultimate Great South African Novel, which I don't believe has been written yet. What would it need to qualify for this title? It would need Alan Paton's storytelling skill, J.M. Coetzee's insight, Can Themba's brilliance and the readability of Harry Potter!

**SK & RG** What book are you working on currently and why?

**EB** That has to remain top secret, for fear of premature miscarriage!
Sue Williamson is a practising artist based in Cape Town. She frequently exhibits internationally and has participated in the Sydney Biennial of 1992 and in ‘The New Republics’ at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne in 2000. In 1989 Sue published *Resistance Art in South Africa* (David Philip Publishers, CT, and St Martin’s Press, New York) and in 1996, in a co-authorship with Ashraf Jamal, wrote *Art in South Africa, the Future Present*. She is the founding editor of www.artthrob.co.za, an online magazine on contemporary art in South Africa.

*Truth Games* is a series of interactive artworks that reflect on the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the healing/not healing of post-apartheid South Africa. Each piece pictures an accuser, a defender, and an image of the event in question. At no time are all three images visible, as text taken from the transcripts and printed on slats obscures sections. Viewers are invited to slide these slats across different parts of the images to conceal or reveal parts in an attempt to replicate the action of the country in trying to decide whether the truth is being spoken or still hidden. The titles of the works in *Truth Games* reflect the names of accuser and perpetrator and include one of the statements made by one of the people involved. Reflecting on her art Sue comments: ‘In my work, I attempt to re-contextualise issues of contemporary South African history. By mediating through art the myriad images and information offered for public consumption in the mass media, I try to give dispassionate readings and offer a focus and new opportunities for engagement. Art can provide a distance and a space for such considerations’.
Tony Yengeni — 'wet bag' torture — Jeff Benzien from the Truth Games series hangs in the dining room of the new Big Brother reality show on South African TV which opened in early August. It is hoped that Sue’s work will act to stimulate discussion of ‘weightier issues than before’. In September 2002, a number of other pieces from the series will be hung in St George’s Cathedral for the ceremonial handing over of the final Truth and Reconciliation Commission report from Archbishop Desmond Tutu on behalf of the TRC commissioners to President Thabo Mbeki. These two very different appearances for Truth Games meet Sue’s desire to create art for a popular audience.

'Hands-on' at the Dakawa Art Centre, Grahamstown (National Arts Festival, 1999)
**Truth Games**


   Simphiwo Mtimkulu was an Eastern Cape student jailed for his consciousness-raising activities. Fed rat poison while in jail, he was released, only to disappear from his home shortly afterwards. His mother campaigned actively to uncover the truth after his abandoned car was ‘discovered’ by the police near the South African border. After years of silence, the police admitted responsibility for killing him and burning his body.


   The Guguletu Seven, as they became known, died in a shootout with the police on March 3 1986 in Guguletu. The seven activists were Zandisile Mjobo, Zola Swelani, Mandla Mxinwa, Godfrey Miya, Themba Mlifi, Zabonke Konile and Christopher Piet. Two consecutive inquests at the time cleared the police, but relatives of the seven urged the TRC to investigate the matter further, and nine policemen were subpoenaed to give evidence. At the hearing, Capt. John Sterrenberg was asked why he had been ‘photographed smiling’ next to the dead body of Christopher Piet.


   In July 1993, five young members of the APLA — the Azanian People’s Liberation Army, attacked the congregation of St James Church, in Kenilworth, Cape Town, bursting into the packed church with guns, and eleven people died. Marita Ackerman, mother of Liezl Ackerman, was one of them. The only member of the group convicted of the attack, Gcinikhaya Makoma, was granted amnesty in June 1998. In an interchange with Liezl Ackerman, Makoma said he was sorry about the death, but maintained his position as a solider of the struggle.


   Mr Jansen was the victim of mob violence in Crossroads, a squatter camp near Cape Town. Driving through Crossroads at a time of public unrest in the late eighties, his vehicle was overturned and set alight. He died the following day. Seeking amnesty and reconciliation, Afrika Hlapo, jailed for the killing, said his intention had been to seek a better world for South Africa, and expressed his desire to meet with the Jansen family. This request was refused by the widow.
Troublesome activists

the terror of knowing

safeguard the government

they are not sorry

Reduced the bodies to ash

Still cannot believe them.

Missing

Colour laser prints, wood, metal, plastic, perspex 80 cm x 120 cm x 6 cm.
Colour laser prints, wood, metal, plastic, perspex 80cm x 120 cm x 6 cm.
Colour laser prints, wood, metal, plastic, perspex 80cm x 120 cm x 6 cm.
Colour laser prints, wood, metal, plastic, perspex 80cm x 120 cm x 6 cm.
Figure 1
Married women at a cultural event in full traditional regalia (adapted from earlier forms) of an area called oThwebe. They are led by a head woman (carrying the red umbrella) who decides fashion changes.
Figure 2
A black leather skirt, *isidwaba* — made from goat or cow skin. A very prestigious possession, equivalent to the Western wedding band.

Figure 3
A waist apron worn over the hide skirt, *utshodo lwangasemuva*. This item shows how cloth (Western item) could in contemporary times be used with beads that in their original African forms would be made from stones, seeds and wood.
Figure 4
A man’s head-ring, *ungiyane* — made from a mimosa tree. Indicates high regard for men who have excelled in their calling (as warrior, headman of a village).

Figure 5
A layered cotton dress item, *umtako* — worn by married women, wrapped around the waist over the black hide skirt. The cloth layers are indicative of the number of years that a woman has been married.
Figure 6
Girls at a cultural event — their dress is symbolic of their status. They are still single but do have boyfriends. Their skirts (now in beads) used to be cut into tussles from barks of *ubendle*, a shrub bearing yellow edible blooms and leaves which always hang down. Contemporary beads simulate old forms.