

# THE PROFESSOR ROBERT CHARLTON COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE

The Volcano Desk, Drugs and the Doctor. Curiosity piqued by this intriguing title, guests of the English Academy of Southern Africa filed into the Senate Room of the newly-named Solomon Mahlangu House (Senate House) of Wits University for Derek Swemmer's lecture commemorating the late Professor Robert Charlton.

Dr Swemmer was invited by the Academy to pay tribute to Professor Charlton who played a pivotal role in steering Wits through the turbulent 1980s. It was, indeed, the worst of times: a state of emergency had been declared, and it was a time of almost constant police presence on campus, tear gas, violent arrests of the university's staff and students, threats to academic freedom, by the then Minister of Education, F W de Klerk, and the beginning of a genuine effort to transform the university.

Until he resigned in 2014, Professor Charlton was a long-standing and committed member of the English Academy, helping to secure the Academy's current premises in the Richard Ward Building on Wits's East Campus.

Guests were welcomed to the function by Professor Nhlanhla Maake, a Council member. Then the Honorary Secretary, Dr David Robinson, addressed the assembled guests about the Academy's history - from its inception in 1961 and its evolution over the last 50 odd years.

The occasion also honoured winners of some of the Academy's 2015 prizes and awards. Professor Sope Maithufi, convener of the 2015 EASA Olive Schreiner Prize for Prose read the prizes' citations.

First to the podium was Jill Nudelman, author of *Inheriting the Earth* (UKZN Press, 2012), one of the joint winners of the Olive Schreiner Prize. The other winner was Imran Garda, author of *The Thunder that Roars* (Umuzi, 2014). Watched proudly by her family, including her mother, husband and two sons, as well as her friends - they called themselves the 'Jill Nudelman Fan Club' - Jill accepted her prize. Her response touched on the fact that after sending her manuscript to several publishers, it was finally accepted by UKZN Press so the prize was an enormous encouragement to write in future. She also remarked on the reluctance of the white community of South Africa to embrace the country's transformation, one of the themes of her book.

Next was Shamim Garda, Imran's mother, to accept the Olive Schreiner Prize for Prose on his behalf. Imran lives in Istanbul. Imran's response, read by his mother, referred to the younger writer's literary 'heros': Ahmed Essop and Zakes Mda. Imran was very proud to follow in the footsteps of these illustrious writers, noting that they had both been past winners of the same Olive Schreiner Prize. Ahmed Essop was singled out as particularly influential. Essop's *The Hajji and Other Stories*, was one of the first books Imran read peopled with characters like him and with life experiences in Fordsburg similar to his own.

The third winner to be honoured was Rethabile Masilo whose poem, 'Swimming' (New Coin, 2014) won the 2015 Thomas Pringle Award for Best Poetry in Journals. Members of the audience were touched to see Mrs Masilo, reliant on a walking stick, make her way to the podium to accept the prize on her son's behalf. Rethabile currently lives in Paris. His sister, Tokoloho Masilo, read his response. The response reminded the audience about the repression in Lesotho, something most South Africans were unaware of, having to live with their own repression under apartheid. The poem poignantly described the dangerous journey his father made swimming across a river from Lesotho to the 'relative' safety of South Africa. This, after Lesotho security forces had turned their brutality on the Masilo family, killing his father's three year old nephew.

In the absence of Professor Leila Kajee, who unfortunately could not make it because of illness, Dr Robinson read the citation before the recipient of the 2015 Gwen Knowles-Williams bursary,

Barbara Scholtz, reading for a Masters of Education at the University of Johannesburg, came to the podium to receive her award. Her family and friends, including her two young children, were in the audience to support her. Barbara thanked her husband and children for their patient support of her studies, acknowledging that it is not easy to combine the roles of mother and wife with the demands of post-graduate studies. In an evening paying tribute to creativity, it is fitting that Barbara's thesis explores the role of creativity, especially creative writing, in English education.

After the Academy acknowledged all its prize- and award winners, it was Dr Swemmer's turn. Dr Swemmer had worked for Professor Charlton as his personal assistant when he was appointed Vice-Chancellor.

Professor Charlton trained as a doctor. As a medical practitioner, he published widely and made a major contribution to the field of iron metabolism. In later years, he was instrumental, unsuccessfully, in getting the Medical and Dental Council to prosecute the doctors who were involved in the cover-up of Steve Biko's death.

He was an extraordinarily busy man, with a untiring capacity for work. The 'volcano desk' of the lecture's title was a reference to a desk piled with papers on all sides of him who was at work in the middle of all this - the crater so to speak.

Dr Swemmer described Professor Charlton's love of the English language. He used the language articulately and precisely in his speeches which were edited and re-edited until the moment just before he delivered them.

He was also a highly principled man who had to confront the government of the day on many issues.

The lecture ended with a vote of thanks from Professor Thurman, the newest member of Council. After the programme ended, the Charlton family and friends, family and friends of the prize winners and members of the English Academy congregated in the foyer for drinks and a bite to eat.

Annette Meklis  
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BARBARA SCHOLTZ, RECIPIENT OF THE GWEN KNOWLES-WILLIAMS BURSARY,  
DELIVERS HER ACCEPTANCE SPEECH



DR DAVID ROBINSON, JULL NUDELMAN (PRIZE-WINNER) AND PROF SOPE MAITHUFI



DR DAVID ROBINSON, NHALANHLA MAAKE AND SOPE MAITHUFI



FAMILY AND FRIENDS OF IMRAM GARDA



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