



# #questiontime

Zoë Wicomb, South African writer

## 'All writers are outsiders up to a point'

### CV

**Born:** November 23, 1948, South Africa

**Studies:** University of the Western Cape (South Africa), Reading University (UK)

**Works:** You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town (1987), David's Story (2000), Playing in the Light (2006), October (2014).

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South-African writer Zoë Wicomb has been living in Scotland for decades, after leaving her country during apartheid. Her writing has been praised by readers and fellow authors alike, including Nobel laureates JM Coetzee and Toni Morrison. In a recent visit to Buenos Aires to present the newly translated book *Miradas*, which features several stories by Wicomb and was published by the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, the writer spoke to the *Herald* about her connection with her homeland, the challenges of being an outsider in Europe, and the rewards of struggling with writing.

The West has long had this Romantic notion of exile, do you share it in any way?

Well, I don't have a Romantic notion of what émigré means. I was very surprised at myself yesterday. I read this story by a young white South African from a very privileged background, who is writing about travelling in Europe. And he talks of himself as being in exile. And I was surprised at my response to that: I realized that I had, unconsciously perhaps, thought of exile as that which is imposed of people under a particular set of conditions. So I felt quite offended by his use of the word. I don't think it's Romantic and I don't particularly want to live outside of my country.

Did you feel a sense of disconnection with your homeland when you first went back?

Not really. In fact, I went back for a few years because I tried to go back and I felt perfectly connected. My family and friends are there and I always kept in touch with everybody. I would have liked to have stayed there. I left because I found it intolerable. Then, when things changed, I was no longer able to stay there because you don't remain the same person, you're not in deep freeze and you don't come out in a sort of thaw, where you're pristine and reconstituted. Years pass by, you change, and your circumstances change. I have a family of my own now and I realized I couldn't separate myself from my new life.

And how did you connect with your "elsewhere," with Scotland in this case?

I live in a white culture. And I'm not white. So there's no way I can be assimilated into that culture. In Scotland, where I live, I'm always an outsider. Perhaps you could say that all writers are outsiders up to a point. In order to write about a culture, you have to, in a sense, position yourself as an outside observer, so it serves

its purpose. It's still an important part of living in a culture where I won't ever belong.

Thank you for those last words, it all started to sound too optimistic.

But it is such a problem, not belonging? (laughs) In my own house, with my own family, I can't say I'm an outsider. There are layers, there's a complexity to it. But undoubtedly, in terms of writing, I feel as if I'm writing from a distance when I write about the culture I live in. But I don't want to fetishize the notion of belonging because you could say that nobody is entirely a total émigré.

What's the process of writing about a homeland while living apart from it?

The fact is, I don't really know what I'm doing when I write (laughs). Usually I have a very inchoate idea, very unformed, I know vaguely that I want to write about X, Y, Z, but I don't know how it will evolve as a narrative. So I go South Africa every year to do my research, and then it's really a daily struggle until something emerges. I always experience this sense of despair that I won't make it. I have a love and fear relationship with writing. I often ask myself, if I dislike it so much, why do I do it?

**'The irony is that I started writing because I can't speak in public. And now that I've written, I have to speak about it!'**

Is that your favourite rhetorical question?

Yes, it is. (laughs) You know, I talk a lot, I know that, but I've never been able to speak in public and, at the same time, I find myself constantly having to do it. And it's a dreadful experience. The irony is that I started writing because I can't speak. And now that I've written, I have to speak about it.

Trevor Noah is taking over *The Daily Show* and he's been quite vocal about his upbringing in South Africa where he wasn't allowed to be either black or white. Do you still see the country split that way?

I suppose the country is different in many ways, but in others it's still very much the same. What Trevor Noah says is very strange, because I look at him and think, oh, he's a coloured boy. He's got a home, he's got a community, he's got a whole ideological structure in which he would have been contained and yet he says he grew up in an African community where he was ostracized for not being black enough.

And why were you surprised by his story?

Well, it's very strange for me because South Africa is very rigidly structured. In some way, when I go back to Western Cape, where I'm from, it's still much the same in that sense. I either go to a dinner party with white people or I go to a dinner party with coloured people. Of course we can move across boundaries but people, to a large extent, still live in their own communities.



Was it overwhelming to find your way to writing in Europe?

In many ways, I'm in a privileged position. An educated woman, who can make her own living, who has a job—I'm a teacher. So I don't rely on writing to make a living, and that helps a lot. On the other hand, recently I was standing in the street, at the bus stop looking at a leaflet, a woman came up to me and said, 'Do you want me to help you to read that, dear?' The fact is, I don't have to be offended by it. I can dismiss it—because I can read. There's a level you can reach, perhaps when you get to my age, when you can just say: Fuck it! It's not my problem anymore, that's your problem, deal with it.

How do you strike a balance between teaching and writing?

It's always been very hard. I started late, because I was terrified of writing. I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but I was too afraid to do it. And it's not like I'm a great write anyway.

How do you assess yourself?

There are clear criteria: I don't publish with mainstream publishers. I don't have an agent, I'm probably the only writer left in the world without an agent. But I want as few people to have to communicate with as possible. I get things published and I do have translations, but it's random. And frankly, since I've always been able to make my living from teaching, I don't have to sell books. There's this great compulsion to write a book, but I don't really care whether it sells.

So you see publishing as giving birth to a book, bringing it into the world, and then you just set it free?

Yes, I set it free. I'm frankly embarrassed by it but I'm a much better reader than I'm a writer. Perhaps it's a sense of shame, of saying, I've brought this mediocre thing into the world, it's not brilliant, but it's the best I can do. So I just never read the reviews.

After your experience with exile and social differences in Scotland, how do you see the issue of migrants flowing into Europe? Do you think they'll become Europe's next pariahs?

They probably will. The discourse in England is, they will come and exploit our welfare state, they will take our money and our jobs. The fact is that a lot of these people are highly educated professionals who are not going to be on welfare, taking handouts from the government. They'll be finding work, their self-respect won't allow them to lie around. This will change Europe. But I hope the next generation will not have the same pariah relationship. It's a good thing for Europe, to shake them up.

You just said your idea of home is wherever you are right now.

In the light of so many people dying in their tents to get from one place to another that might be better, it seems to me that we have to rethink the very word "home" and stop harping on about situations that are perfectly bearable. In my privileged position, I don't have the right to be quibbling about what home is and where home is. Let's say I've got two homes, let's look at it not in terms of lack, let's stop thinking about it as a problem. I can enjoy both places.