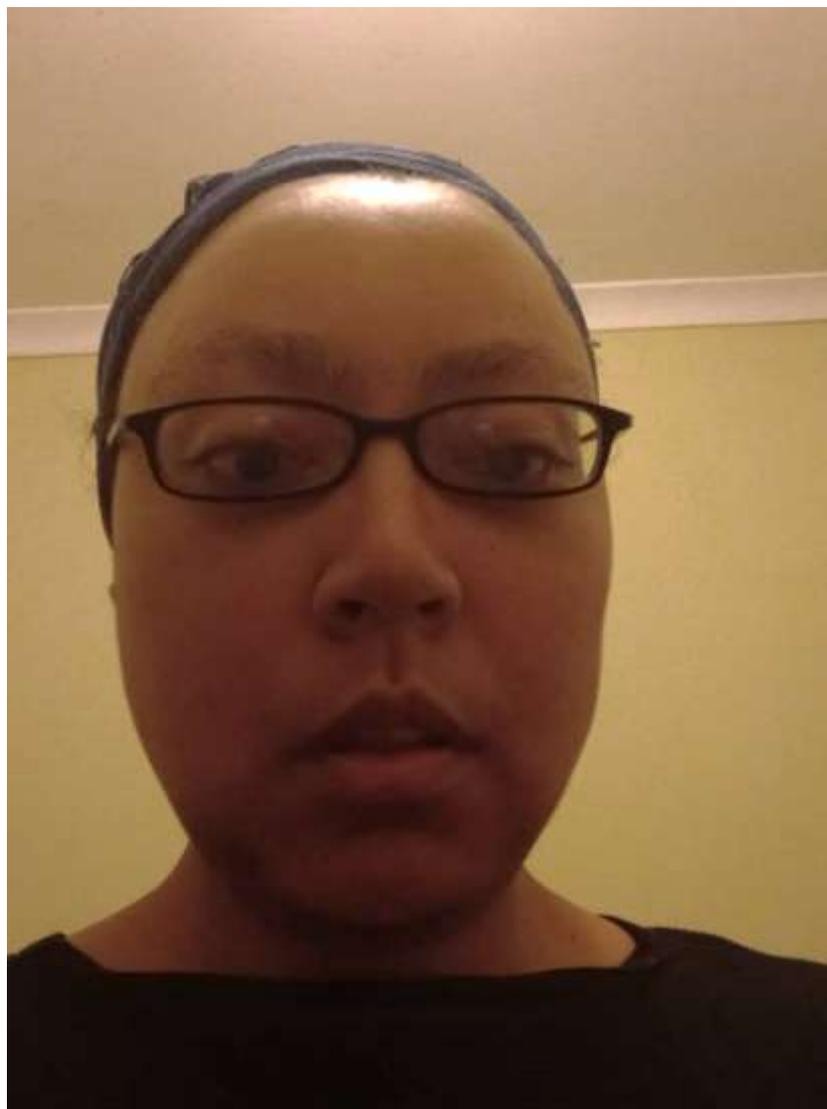


Sentinel Literary Quarterly

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ABIGAIL GEORGE

Monday Writer
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About Abigail George

Abigail George is a feminist, poet and short story writer. She is the author of poetry collections *Africa Where Art Thou*, *Feeding the Beasts*, *Of Smoke Flesh And Bone* and *The Anatomy of Melancholy* and the short story collection *Winter in Johannesburg*. Her other titles include *All About My Mother*, *Brother Wolf and Sister Wren*, *Sleeping Under The Kitchen Tables*, *In The Northern Areas* and *The Scholarship Girl*,

She is the recipient of two South African National Arts Council Writing Grants, one from the Centre for the Book and the Eastern Cape Provincial Arts and Culture Council.

She was born and raised in the coastal city of Port Elizabeth, the Eastern Cape of South Africa, educated there and in Swaziland and Johannesburg her work has recently been anthologised in the Sol Plaatje EU Poetry Anthology IV and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

She has been published widely in print in South Africa, Australia, Kenya, Cameroon, Uganda, Senegal, Kenya, Nigeria, Ireland, India, Finland, Canada, the United Kingdom, Singapore and the United States, notably in *Timbila*, *Botsotso*, *Ons Klyntji*, *New Coin*, *New Contrast*, *African Writer*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* and *Echoes Literary Journal*.

The Monday Writer Interview:

Abigail George in conversation with **Nnorom Azuonye**

Hello Abigail. I am pleased to welcome you as a Sentinel Literary Quarterly Monday Writer. I will take up your time over the next few days in conversation about you and your work.

Thank you for taking the time to interview me. You were one of the first editors who believed in me and in my work. I believe, as I have said before, that correspondence between creatives is holy.

Holy! O.K. I like that. Congratulations on the publication of your new chapbook *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Praxis in 2020 which is available as a FREE Download from their website. How did it find its way into the Praxis Chapbook series? What impact on literature do you expect from this type of increasingly popular unfettered access to poetry books?



In one word; destiny. Another; God. I want the chapbook to go down in world history and so far so good. I strongly believe that the more people have access to poetry at no cost, the more they will read and in turn create even more poetic literature. I owe it all to my personal relationship with my Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ.

It has taken me a long time to find my voice and purpose; I want to challenge and change the world view of mental health with my chapbook. I think the poems speak to the heart of what humanity is struggling with and every individual's private pain, mask, costume and public persona.

I really love the poems in your new chapbook. I kept returning to these lines from 'The Science of Breath';

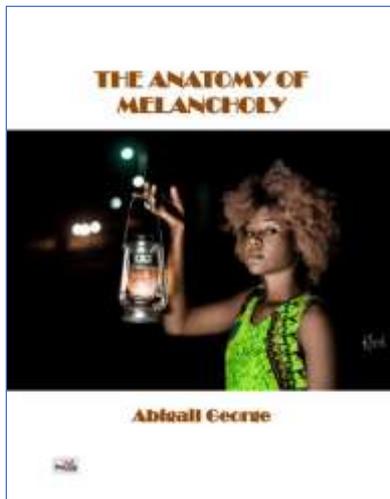
"I'm addicted to poems and funerals, roses and cacti. I can love you. I can harm you. I can't promise you I won't."

because they capture joy, sorrow, speed, finality and release. What experience led you to such delicate articulation of life's paradox?

Falling in love. Coming to terms with grief and bereavement and my journey through darkness (bipolar) towards the light (being baptised).

You were born, raised and still live in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, right? Tell me a little about your attachment to that city and her place in your writing.

My childhood home by the sea in this magnificent coastal city is masterful in her guidance towards understanding my identity in a post-first-wave Covid world. Here I feel the subtle energies and realms of the ocean plunging into the depths of the sea and then into the depths of life and breathing lessons found in streams and rivers.



Home as I have written about it in countless short stories, at midnight, in the early hours of the morning was dysfunctional, yet loving. My childhood bedroom where I have worked diligently at my craft since the age of eight has become my office. I call my writing automatic writing. The city itself is like a bloom. A message like Gertrude Stein's adopted hometown. A rose like no other.

The visionaries in this coastal city, the founding families, the attachment to the island of St Helena are principalities that I am grateful to be working on all of my life. My literary work is available at Cory Library, Rhodes University (a short story collection *Winter in Johannesburg*) in Makhanda and the South End Museum not far from Nelson Mandela University.

I have been told I was a voracious reader but my parents sheltered and protected me from the brutality of apartheid South Africa. A lot of people emigrated to the States or Australia but I am still here. I love my home. There is lot to be done for the suffering of the mulatto. So, perhaps my work must begin here? Ah! The sea, this city remains an enigma for me.

You started writing at eight? What made you take up writing? Being so young, what did you write about? Share, if you will, what it was like growing up.

Well, my mother took me to speech and drama classes with her. She did it for one year. Maybe she was too ambitious. She stopped and then I started going by myself; the only mixed race kid in an acting school for children. Everyone else was blonde, they played hockey, their hair was silky smooth and straight. They were the pale natives. I was the mulatto whose handsome paternal grandfather's life had been derailed by the war. I watched TV at his house with him in the afternoons after school while waiting for my mother to pick me up. We would watch CNN together. I wrote poetry.

The house I grew up in had a library. My father's textbooks, archived material, there was D. H. Lawrence alongside Danielle Steele, Khalil Gibran and Rumi. My mother's textbooks and women's books that she ordered via post. I started reading early. I looked at the pregnancy book with interest.

The pictures of what an expectant mother should and should not eat. I had a diary. I have journals. I draw a little. I paint a little. Even then I knew I was different. Other people made me feel this way about myself. Other children and adults who were even teachers. Teaching is a calling like any career but I think that many people think of a degree in education or a teacher's diplomas as a second choice. You know, Plan B or it is just a job that they do pursue their true passion whatever that might be. But I am making a statement. Not judging. I wrote about everything. Nothing was off limits in the library. We could read anything we wanted and grew up in a house with relative freedom.

I never censored myself at 8 and I don't now. But I had a photographic memory at 4 and was good at memorising babyish poems. English poems by dead and brilliant male poets who went to the best schools in the United Kingdom. Also I was rubbish in English in primary but that all changed in high school.

We also always went to the beach. Swimming became a form of therapy for me from the mild depression I oftentimes struggled with, and battled to deal with as a child. My parents were, well most parents are ill-equipped to deal with a child who is truly gifted in childhood. I was precocious.

Any particular reason you were interested in the pregnancy book?

No. She was expecting my sister. I would look at the pictures of the healthy foods that you were supposed to eat and basically the cradle of mankind. Our home for the first nine months of our lives. In the foetal position in our mother's womb.

Your identity is clearly very important to you, as it should everyone. How have you used writing to address your own and other people's identity questions?

I believe in the excellence of truth. That honesty is the best policy. I also believe in prayer and meditation, having a healthy diet, leading a spiritual lifestyle, that you are as an artist, being poet and writer instructed by the laws of the supreme universe's consciousness. For example, what is hurting the universe, wounding humanity on every basic level of the hierarchy of their biological, physiological and psychological framework that inspires my writing?

My own grief, solitude or rather solitary nature instructs my writing. I have always had this concept of identity. I have only realised in later years how my writing can also address other people's identity questions as you so put it, Nnorom.

Our echo-system is fragile. Now I have so many questions. Are we really alone in the universe? What dimension do we exist in? Is there alien life out there? The stuff of non-reality really. There are days when my writing life world is a paradise of studying human behaviour and our natural world through the basic education that we are all narcissists. We want as individuals to feel loved and accepted, be popular and beautiful and be immortalised in some way. I have chosen poetry to research, and focus my acute observations, my words and writing life. All my books, my blogs, searching for both answers and routine are markers for my identity and purpose, meaning in my life, protecting my little family, seeing my office space as just another parallel dimension in my reality. If all of that makes sense!

I went from Rilke, Hemingway, Salinger, Updike, through Shakespeare, to searching for my identity in the works of notable and key female literary figures in history. Adeline Virginia Wood, Ingrid Jonker. I am a poet who reads short stories and very widely. The mental health and welfare of the natural world, plant life and the animal kingdom is of great concern to me at this time in the history of our civilisation. I don't know what your thinking is on this but I would love to know what contemporary poets are thinking and writing about.

The only way, Abigail, to know what contemporary poets are thinking and writing about is to read their work, and engage them in conversations. This is why I have been interviewing writers since 2003, and why we now run the SLQ Monday Writer series. Sometimes I read a poem and I wonder if the poet lived the experience, is just a witness or is interrogating the universe. You write about your life mostly, right?

My writing is semi-autobiographical. My identity yearns for both art and non-attachment, detachment from noise and toxic personality from the inner bustle of the city, people, crowds. In my own writing it is a kind of meditative form of therapy and as I have said before, a journey, a walk in an abandoned hallucination of the mind if you will, of a field of wildflowers. Each flower representative of value, virtue, affirmation, competency, instruction and leadership. Also my writing adds value, I hope, other writers' imaginations and their creative identities.

Why do you write short stories?

Therapy, rest, relaxation, peace of mind, reaching a state of nirvana. I feel I have to pay it forward like in that film with Kevin Spacey, Helen Hunt and Haley Joel Osment. The kid who freaked me out in American filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* more than twenty years ago.

I want to help people deal with trauma, depression, addiction issues as I have seen it first-hand in both my maternal and paternal family.

I aspire to be a female Rilke, Hemingway, Updike. Female writers can give their male contemporaries a run for their money.

Your Facebook page carries a look of positive Christian messages. Are you a religious or a spiritual person, or both? How does your faith guide your writing and messages?

I am both a spiritual person and a Christian. I have done courses on positive thinking and living a stress-free life and meditation through the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. I went to Sunday school, memorised verses from the Scriptures, my religious study was faith-based, I would not presume to call faith, God, the supreme being, the alpha and omega, the infinite being that brought this universe to life. It is a conditioned thought process or a kind of false indoctrination. I followed instinct and found belief.

In 2019, Sentinel Literary Quarterly published your poem, Jean Rhys. Is she one of your influences? I also see from references to her native Dominica in several of your poems that you are fascinated by the island. Which other female writers have been important to your writing life?

The novel *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* by Jean Rhys was a major influence in my life. She was, as can be said of all these women that have influenced me in one way or the other; Adeline Virginia Woolf, Assia Wevill, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Petya Dubarova, Chimamanda Adichie, Anita Brookner, Zadie Smith, Ingrid Jonker, Karin Boye and the recent recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature who just happens to be a female poet Wislawa Szymborska, a visionary, feminist in her outlook and thinking. In a class of her own and lonely and terribly misunderstood. The savant female genius.

By the way, sorry to take you back, do I detect some kind of disdain towards "dead and brilliant male poets who went to the best schools in the United Kingdom"?

You detect jealousy. I never finished high school. I don't have a degree. I want to teach, lecture, publish more, go down in history, become a professor. It feels as if I am in a novel phase of my life.

I say, you have done well for yourself. And I can't see why you should not achieve your dreams.

Thank you, Nnorom. That is so kind.

You and your brother are writing a biography of your father. When can we expect this book? Surely, it must throw some light on life and bi-racial relationships in the apartheid era South Africa.

Soon. Bulls eye. It doesn't deal with every aspect of my father's life which is why we thought of extending the publication date. Besides, other book projects came up for me. There is certainly a lot of juicy material in the book. No mention of bi-racial love affairs. It is not a narrative on apartheid or this democracy we are living in now. It is just about a rather exceptional and gifted personality born into extreme poverty in Africa. It will speak about a South African divide, rule and conquer by any means necessary, an apartheid South Africa where laws were unjust and unlawful in every sense of that word.

What else are you working on right now?

A novel. Details will be available not too long from now.

Thanks Abigail, for giving me your time.

Thank you for this kindness you have shown me. **SLQ**

Jean Rhys

You need a ticket
to get to a destination
anywhere kind of place.
A place like Dominica, Dominica, Dominica.
Perhaps you will dance
like gangs of ballet,
find love there waiting
upon a throne of blue sky.
Bitter Karoo willagers patterned
with the bare milk
of frost, cattle, cheese,
fruit, grass. Perhaps
something good will
come out of it all. A hotline
in need of translation.
A dutiful symphony of Masai.
The end of climate change
as we know it just like the
history of the forced removals.

The same place, and tiredness
that I felt in mid-December,
and in January overwhelmed
me and I was left with questions.
I want to know everything,
what love is for, failure for quitters,
Rhys's Dominica, Dominica, Dominica.
Yes, I give a damn about that.
What I will be left with in the end.
It feels as if I have lived for a thousand
years. I feel as if I have lived with
the tides. Particles of cities
and atoms. Those opened.
Those crushed. The wind is a humming
woman like Jean Rhys, coming stars,
the gentle touch of flora. There
is always a reward after a literary
fire. Literature born in that flood
flame, hook, truth, accident, age,
surface, bracket, dirt, current.
That is enough for me. It is alive.
Rhys's Dominica, Dominica, Dominica.
Nobody told me that. I just knew it
by instinct. A dictionary is a place I lay

my head conversing with words like
jam or the regret of failure or
intense ritual. Rolling thunder
arousing lightning. Whispers, unhealthy traces
of them are manifested like a howl
by a dog, a twin, doppelganger, fluid.
Exhaling fish, the starkness
of a field. Grief's gold, wakeful.
The flow, the ebb, the wave of the
glacial, tidal, cyclic, powerful
maiden. Darwin's claw, and club.
Tangled reciprocity fishing for the locked away,
and delicate hoisted microscopic. The
eyes were the windows to her soul.

Mikale

He's not here but he is here at the same time.
The smell of the raging fire in the bush
lingers. Its time-place. I am flying to the sun.
I want that spark. That flying impulse that I
know is for real. There is a beauty in
possessing that commodity. My education
has been hard. I have been troubled.
Troubled always comes with doubt and insecurity.
Once I was in love now I am in love with
everything around me. The environment shooting
up out of the ground like there was no tomorrow.
People sing of living for tomorrow. What is important?
Bright language. The exploration of a child's
otherworldliness. Is any arrow tender?
Does it have an art form like a photograph?
A self-portrait of a history erased. To be fragile
the past has taught me is to be beautiful. Noble.
He is not here but at the same time he is.

Learning to fly

We monitor bright-eyed constellations, their threads across
The sky stars are cultivated in the night air with their pleasant
White bellies shiny and new like a coin from the mint
My mother and I watch the dogs as they go
For their evening run dressed in our nightgowns
Hair at the nape of our necks wet from our hot baths
We are still warm the day's events finally catching up
With us, the machinations, the torments we dismissed we are
No longer at war I must take advantage of this recovery
I watch the weather report on the news
Willing it to rain to address the water restrictions
But the showers and the downpours do not come

The Science of Breath

I have made mistakes in my life. I'm still paying for that dark interpretation. For them with half-malice and delight.

How cold the stars. The heroic damsel in distress. Abyss found in dementia's shoebox. Abyss found in Dominica.

Stars are cold in winter. In summer they begin to warm up. Show their true selves. Goodbye my eyes, my swimming limbs.

Let me count the grains of sand with my hands. Let me travel slow then hard and fast in this country. Let me moan about the

unfairness of it all. Look here at this surface of flame showing off daylight. Flames licking at desire. Look at this earth-dream

that once belonged to the river and then the ocean depth of it. I think of the lungs of London. The slow and deliberate inhale

and exhale. The busy Amazon-structure to it. I don't think that men are safe anymore. Their body language tastes of liver and

sinful things. Marechera liked sex once. His body (shimmered) like a leaf. His mind a sweet-sweet-sweet journey of shades.

I'm ecstatic about the seed he sowed. The uncommon hero-leader he was. His anointing. Now, let me count the grains

of sand on this land called Zimbabwe. Ask why the sea. Kindness is a seed. Obedience is a seed. Power is a fish.

A seed with hope and expectation. The theory of love speaks to me in Technicolor waves. Shattering clarity. The spirits

of this place need us just as much as we need them. Love speaks to me. That theory of falling in love a phantom-sonnet.

You were a careless mistake. The earth moves (inside of me) like a woman now. Chirping birds gravitating towards

the warm ochre earth. This amount of love. The eternal song in his river teeth. I know where they are right now.

In the context of heaven. They're found in a paradise for the lonely, parched soil, the swarm a language in your eyes.

I'm addicted to poems and funerals, roses and cacti. I can love you. I can harm you. I can't promise you I won't.

Notes and Contact

Follow Abigail George on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/dbm.abigail.george>

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The Monday Writer Interview: Abigail George in Conversation with Nnorom Azuonye ©2020 Abigail George and Nnorom Azuonye.

Nnorom Azuonye is the author of *Funeral of the Minstrel* (a play), *The Bridge Selection: Poems for the Road, Letter to God & Other Poems*, *We Need God in Nigeria Again (Free on Kindle)* and *On the Record: Conversations with Writers & Artists* (12 July 2021, SPM Publications)
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Give us the name and contact details of the author you'd like to see featured as a Monday Writer and we will take it from there. Better still, you may interview the author yourself and get example work and bio to go with the feature. Want to get involved in the Monday Writer series? Email me, Nnorom Azuonye at editor@sentinelquarterly.com

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For original, previously unpublished poems in English language, on any subject, in any style, up to 50 lines long. Prize fund £600.00

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