

Interview with **Consuelo Roland**
the writer behind *The Good Cemetery Guide*

*“Today I swam in the sea. That is what he tells the skeleton that night.
Just keep on putting one foot ahead of the other, the skeleton reminds him.”*

The Good Cemetery Guide

Who is Consuelo Roland?

I am an optimist. I believe in guardian angels and the possibility of happy endings. It has struck me often in the last year when I've been asked to talk about *The Good Cemetery Guide* that by taking small steps, one at a time, I have become quite a different person from the super-stressed IT Project Manager I used to be. In June 2002 I applied to the UCT Creative Writing Masters program and was accepted. At the beginning of 2003 I left the Information Technology field to fulfil a lifelong dream and become a writer. I told myself I wouldn't look back. At the end of 2004 I graduated from the UCT Masters in Creative Writing program. In September 2005 my first novel, *The Good Cemetery Guide*, was on the bookshop shelves. It was the right decision for me; the (temporary) loss of financial independence is a small price to pay for the enormous satisfaction writing gives me. I know what it means now to feel as if one has been given wings to fly.

My parents emigrated from Italy to South Africa after the war. Being exposed to European culture and values has broadened my perspective, but South Africa is the country of my birth and my home. Thanks to my mother I could read English and Italian fluently before going to school. Since those early days books have been able to keep my attention in a way nothing else does.

Books are spiritual to me. Writers in general are highly curious people who strive to understand the meaning of life through their work. What I've come to understand in the last few years is that I'm not alone in my love of the written word. The place where I'm at right now is largely the result of other people's generosity of spirit. While writing *The Good Cemetery Guide* I often felt as if I was tapping into some subconscious stream of knowledge; as if the universe was conspiring to help me along. I've learnt to listen harder to the messages that come from the external world as well as to have faith in my own internal voice. Nowadays I know everything is as it should be; the life and work experiences I've picked up along the way, good and bad, have been necessary to get me to the point where I allow myself the pleasure of

working at being a good writer as well as being a committed home executive, mother and wife.

I live in Hout Bay with my husband, teenage son and a menagerie of pets. I see the most beautiful sunsets in the world from my kitchen window.

Who is your favourite novelist and why?

That's a tough one but if I have to go for one modern-day writer who has inspired me as a writer, then it's John Irving. His imaginative storytelling with intricate plots and vivid characters resonates with me. He tackles taboo topics with aplomb and verve; we follow him across borders and beyond to places we might not otherwise have dared to explore; incest between a brother and sister, an abortionist with impeccable intentions, the exotic erotic world of street India, and so forth. Every character and situation has the potential to surprise, and often does.

His labyrinthine books require meticulous research. He is on record as saying he never starts a book unless he has completed his research and knows what the ending is.

Interestingly, John Irving is often compared to Charles Dickens for exploring social and moral issues and wanting us to 'know the whole story.' He himself is quoted as saying he feels closest to Michael Ondaatje in writing style and habits.

What do you think about South African writing?

To quote Michelle Magwood of the Sunday Times: "Never in the six-year history of this competition has there been such a strong field of contenders, or so many novels entered."

If the long list of 28 fiction books submitted for the Sunday Times competition is anything to go by then the stories being told are more vibrant and diverse than ever before. The broader band of writing bodes well for SA writers.

The shortlist suggests a new literary historical fiction movement is emerging. Russell Brownlee's *Garden of Plagues*, Andre Brink's *Praying Mantis* and Andrew Brown's *Coldsleep Lullaby* all utilise history to further their stories.

Then there's John van de Ruit's *Spud*, a best-selling publishing phenomenon. He's left history and relevancy at the front door, handled a fresh topic (for SA) with a light touch, and made us laugh. The strategy has paid off handsomely in stellar reader numbers.

I can't help wondering where the chick-lit stories are, the holiday romances, the crime thrillers, the science fiction, and the genre-bender novels. Are there no vampires in South Africa? As SA writers we need to be creatively bold. Our stories can be compelling enough to have universal appeal and sell on global book markets. Nothing is stopping us!

The truth is the non-existence of local agents to help market the work locally and overseas, and the small educated reading base with a disposable income in SA present us with daunting challenges. To top it all your book is likely to end up on the Africa fiction bookshelf in the dead-end space of the book store. Interestingly, *Spud* is usually found in front of the 'normal' big bookshelves (where readers can actually see the books...).

Which explains why more and more authors are taking the self-publishing self-marketing route and succeeding against the odds. It will be interesting to see what opportunities the Cape Town Book Fair offers local writers.

What are you working on at the moment, and when are you hoping to release your next work?

I'm working on a second novel. I'm hoping to be finished by July 2007 but if it takes a bit longer that's okay too. I've made myself available to tell the story but it takes time to listen to the characters involved and get it down right. I've just completed a short story for an Oshun short story collection due for release in October 2006. I'm also completing a course with the Institute of Children's Literature in America.

How did you learn to write and what tools do you use?

I've been a secret writer since the age of 11 when I was given a diary that could be locked. Later I kept an A4 scrapbook of poetry hidden away. I've written poetry most of my life. Poetry has taught me to be precise about what I'm trying to get across. During some of the quieter periods of my life I wrote short stories and articles which I submitted to publishers without success.

Having access to a mentor in the UCT program made an enormous difference. I would not have had the staying power and self-belief to write a complete novel without Ron Irwin, my mentor. After a discussion with him I'd go away with renewed resolve and direction. I learnt to be patient with myself and to take time; I rewrote and rewrote until what I had written was completely in line with some inner vision I had.

Most of the cogitating for *The Good Cemetery Guide* occurred in the car while driving around; I always keep a diary in my handbag and a dictaphone in the car. The actual typing was done on a home computer at any time of the day, whenever the family was not around. There were periods of crazy activity when I had deadlines to meet, especially getting the final manuscript ready for submission to UCT and working with the editor appointed by the publishers. Working with an editor is a very intense collaborative type of effort; for months one is simply improving what is already there.

I sit down at the computer whenever I get the chance (If I can, daily, 7 days a week); the laptop comes with on most holidays and weekends away. I don't know how writers manage without a computer. I find time away from familiar surroundings stimulates the creative impulse, often resolving impasses in the storyline. Similarly, I find good movies and live shows very stimulating.

I also attend Anne Schuster's monthly classes which is a great opportunity to meet other women writers and forces me to share my writing efforts in a public forum – something I've always found difficult. I tend to be better with books than people.

How would you describe your writing style?

It doesn't really fit into any of the standard genres except the literary novel genre which is applied to John Irving's books as well, although I have a problem with the label. There's something inaccessible about the term 'literary' and it's used to apply to so many different types of books. It's been suggested there's an aspect of 'magic realism' to *The Good Cemetery Guide*. It doesn't seem a very useful distinction to me

since fiction by its nature implies flights of fancy and fact is usually far stranger than fiction. There's romance and mystery and humour in the book as well.

What advice could you give to aspiring writers in South Africa?

Just keep putting one foot ahead of the other. Push yourself to take on new writing challenges; writing requires practice like any other craft. Be bolder than you set out to be. Push the creative envelope. If you can entertain yourself you stand a better chance of entertaining others. Listen to your characters. They know the way to wherever you're going, even when you don't. Revise! Revise! Revise! Submit as polished and finished a product as possible, even if it means going through your work with a free-lance editor before sending it in. Research your markets exhaustively. It will save you time and money. Don't forget that at the end of the day it's people – friends, contacts, mentors - who make things happen.

Have you considered writing, or do you write, in any other genres?

Science Fiction is something I'd like to tackle in the future. I'm also very keen to publish children's stories at some stage. There's also a teen/young adult mystery novel in my drawer which needs some work done to it.

The Good Cemetery Guide

Where did you get your idea for *The Good Cemetery Guide*?

The idea for *The Good Cemetery Guide* came after an evening in Kalk Bay listening to the Aquarian Quartet and then driving home in the mist past a Funeral Parlour in Muizenberg. I visualised a guitar player coming home to the funeral parlour after a late-night music session. His thoughts were very clear to me; the next day he would wake up to a normal day's work in the family business as an undertaker.

What did it feel like being short-listed for the Sunday Times Fiction Prize?

Surreal, as if it was happening to someone else. It was really a huge surprise. The long list consisted of 28 books, and many of them written by established authors, so for *The Good Cemetery Guide* to actually get onto the shortlist was totally unexpected.

Although, now when I look back at previous shortlists it seems the judges like debut books. It may even work in one's favour since one is perceived as a fresh new voice.

Why do you think you were the only woman to be short-listed, is it gender or something else?

The criteria set for the competition are: "It should be a work of rare imagination and style, evocative, textured and a tale so compelling as to become an enduring landmark in contemporary fiction".

In 2004 women writers made a clean sweep of three major literary awards; the Sunday Times Fiction Award (Rayda Jacobs), the Sunday Times Alan Paton award (Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela) and the Bessie Head award (Kerry Cullinan). It seems to me it's the inventiveness and vigour of the story as seen through the judge's eyes that is the basis for selection, not any gender bias. Using an undertaker as the main protagonist against the background of a funeral parlour was something of a gamble.

But for me it was a compelling story that made sense. I think there's always an element of luck involved because any judging is going to be subjective.

What I find interesting is that all five short listed novels have central male protagonists. There is a shortage of strong central female characters in books which fall into the literary category, which is surprising since educated women are big readers and writers.

What do you think are some of the issues facing women writing in South Africa?

Generally, it's difficult for a woman to focus single-mindedly on a career which requires a compulsive obsessive level of concentration, because of the demands of child-minding and family made on her. In addition there's a lack of financial and emotional support allowing women to treat writing as a serious career. Training and nurturing is important in any career, but good affordable courses for serious writers which provide decent mentoring for the life of a writing project are difficult to find.

It requires tremendous self-belief and determination to get published and promote one's book, especially without an agent. Men often seem to set up and use connections to publishers and booksellers in a more savvy way.

Powerful stories make the blood run quicker. Readers want to experience emotions, situations and events they would not otherwise experience. As part of a global community we have access to so much creative stimuli and information we never had in the days before TV and home computers.

Initiatives like the short story collection *180 degrees* brought out by Oshun last year (coming out again this year with a different set of local women writers), and Anne Schuster's *Women Flashing* are helpful because they provide a platform for a number of women writers to publish.

Primary limiting factors are the lack of agents and access to overseas markets. Writers must eventually earn a living from their writing or their enthusiasm and commitment will naturally wane.

Do you think it is difficult for women to get published, or do you believe that gender has nothing to do with it?

I don't believe gender has anything to do with it. In fact I think we've never seen such a willingness from publishers to publish and readers to read what South African women write. Especially if you consider the majority of readers in this country are women, and that the writing schools and book clubs they attend wield considerable consumer clout.

If you have a look at books published by graduates from the UCT Masters Program there are significantly more women writers published in SA than men writers; Awerbuck, Schonstein, Beukes, Rose-Innes, Wicomb and Zerbst are all graduates of the UCT program. Could it be women writers flourish given good nurturing and the freedom to write?

Publishers are eager to get their hands on decent light-hearted material in the fields of chick-lit, romance stories and humour. There's a possibly a certain temerity that stops many women from believing they can be published authors. I know it's true for myself; for most of my life it seemed completely unattainable

It gets back to the old problem of women playing so many roles they are unable to focus on their writing as a serious occupation. Men writers tend to be goal-oriented, allowing for few distractions from the task at hand. Being the primary breadwinner in many cases men also often have the advantage of support from spouses or partners which allows them to be single-minded and to find the time to write.

It's one thing to have talent and it's another to have the financial means, self-discipline and focus required to complete a novel. I take my hat off to writers who hold down jobs to survive and write after-hours.

With my husband's financial and emotional support, I have fulfilled a lifelong dream to become a published writer. Now I live my writing and obsess constantly about how to bring it to the next level.