

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni Mda.

The young Zakes Mda was knock-kneed, scrawny and badly behaved. He spent his time carousing; hanging out in skanky clubs; earning drinking money by illegally peddling sketches to tourists at the Holiday Inn Casino in Maseru; not sleeping for days on end – “just dozing off on benches.... We drank and farted and laughed and sang until the next morning, and then moved on to the next shebeen^[1]”. All this to the chagrin and dismay of his hard working lawyer father and his mother, who was a registered nurse^[1].

But he could write a mean love letter. Even at age 14, his letters became famous for their “lyricism and highfalutin imagery. At recess, girls sat under a tree and cheered and laughed and sighed deeply and vented exclamations of envy as she [Keneiloe] read them one of my letters. When he passed a group of giggling school girls, it was not unusual to hear one of them utter a stage whisper to the rest: There he is, the boy who writes such wonderful love letters.^[1]”

Zakes Mda never really planned to be a writer or a poet. It was the death of his dear friend, Santho Mohapeloa, that left him devastated and shocked, but that also inspired him to write his first poem: “Death of an Artist”.

His first play, *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*, won a special merit in the Amstel Playwright of the Year Award in 1978. The next year, he won the award. This was followed by the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Sunday Times fiction prize and the MNet book prize for the novels “*The Heart of Redness*” and “*Ways of Dying*”. Mda was also awarded a South African Literary Awards (SALA) Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010.

Mda is a significant voice. He builds up his works layer by layer^[2]: place; person; customs; traditions; magic. He is writing about ordinary people doing ordinary things. Stories that are sad, sordid and even gruesome^[3]. But then he pulls this multilayered fabric together; each moment recuperated for a different kind of story; stories of rebuilding; stories of liberation; as he cleverly offers his characters new choices and his audience a new vision^[4].

He calls himself an outsider, but he writes from the inside, profoundly and deeply, examining his own – and our – souls. He calls himself a professional dabbler, but he is a significant cultural commentator and social observer.

His is also a multilayered fabric of playwright, novelist, composer, musician and film maker, tee totalling, vegetarian, elliptical training ^[5] part-time bee-keeper.

The older, wiser Zakes Mda is no longer playing truant or fighting in the street, he’s challenging, surprising and cajoling us into absorbing his provocative and deeply moral message^[6].

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to invite you to admit to the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Zanemvula Kizito Gatyeni Mda.

1. Mda, Z., *Sometimes There Is a Void: Memoirs of an Outsider*. **2012**: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
2. Mills, E., *Personal Communication* 31 May **2012**.
3. Mda, Z., *Ways of Dying: A Novel*. **2002**: Picador USA.
4. Fincham, G., *Dance of Life: The Novels of Zakes Mda in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. **2011**: UCT Press.
5. ZakesMda, *I need to share my royalties with the inventor of the elliptical*. **2012**. Twitter Post, viewed 17 May **2012**.
6. Fincham, G., *Personal Communication* 28 May **2012**.