

A South African winner

Poetry that performs from the page

Poet **Lebogang Mashile** speaks to **Makhosazana Xaba**, also a poet about winning the 2006 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa.



Firstly, congratulations on winning the 2006 prestigious Noma Award. What does this mean to you?

It means so many things! I don't think I have the life or professional experience in my career to fully understand what this means. From a very subjective level, it's affirming. It affirms my decision to follow a career that I am passionate about. When I was at Wits studying law, I decided that I needed to follow a career that I love. It affirms fighting with my mother who wanted me to pursue law. Interestingly though, this was the furthest thing from my mind. I stumbled upon it by accident while I was studying. Friends would take me to poetry events, and that's where I first saw performers, doing poetry.

At the time these venues were predominantly musical and poetry was an additional. I saw these people opening their books and saying this is who I am. I was shocked. This was around 2000. I had kept a journal as a child. I think when I was in high school I deliberately began to write poems, just my ramblings. It was seeing these people opening up their secret lives and showing the world everything that got me thinking. In

my world, poetry had been my secret life. So winning the Noma Award affirmed my secret life. It made my secret life my public life.

So your entry into the poetry world was through performance?

Yes, I have enjoyed a lot of visibility as a performer and this is why I wanted to do a book. But, first I am a writer. What I do on stage begins on paper. It has to be worthy on paper before I perform it on stage. The judges who read all the books, the entries, hundreds of them on the African continent knew nothing about my profile as a performer, as a member of *Feelá Sister*, as a TV show host on SABC. They were judging the book based on what they saw on paper.

Tell me about when you heard that you won.

Whew! I was in the North West province. We were doing an episode for *L'attitude* on Indigenous Knowledge Systems. And I had come from speaking with a woman who is one of the most amazing vestiges of knowledge in that community. We were sitting down and having lunch and looking at these monkeys that were coming

down the hills to steal our food. So, my mind was on the monkeys and then I get this phone call. It was the furthest thing from my mind. I didn't even know that my publisher had submitted my book. Even if I had known, I would not have thought I had a chance in hell of winning.

The Noma Award is interesting in that it's a publishers' award and it's not genre-specific. For a small book of poetry to win above all other genres is highly impressive. Did the judges tell you why they chose your book, *In a "Ribbon of Rhythm"* as the winner?

They are not allowed to. But judges have to make notes on their recommendation and these are kept at the Noma archives. So, in theory this information is available to the public. But, they did not tell me. The chairperson explained to me that they start with a big batch of books, over 100 plus, then these get cut down to... a dozen or so. That's when the heated arguments begin. And he said to me, do you know that by the time we got down to the final dozen, the decision was pretty much unanimous, your book kept coming up.



I think if they had the funding they probably would have sub-categories... One wonders, how do you compare a small 100 page poetry book like mine to a 400 page book of non-fiction. But they take many things into consideration. It starts with the quality and content of the book.

They look at innovation in the creation of the book, innovation in the content. Are you saying something new, in a new way? Is the form new? Is the format new? They look at the quality of the book in addition to the quality of the text. Aesthetically they were quite happy with my book. And also something I did not realise is poetry that can be performed, poetry that is oral on the page... is a new thing.

Tell me about the award ceremony.

I went to Gaborone, Botswana with my mother at the end of June. Every year the Noma is handed out in a country different from the country of the winner. They decided to hold the ceremony in Botswana because the Noma archives were being handed over to the University of Botswana... so the ceremony was a part of that occasion.

How does thinking about this feel?

Sometimes when I'm by myself I cannot think about it. It's too much. At the same time it's wonderfully affirming, to me as a young writer. It's affirming to know that my voice has been embraced fully, at such a large scale... I'm the youngest writer, I'm the third poet, I'm the ninth female. The Noma Award started the year I was born, 1979. Imagine that!

Were you familiar with the work of previous winners?

Yes, I had read the work of many of the South Africans, without knowing about the award.

How does your mother relate to your writing?

She is my biggest supporter. She has said to me and publicly to my community, "I was wrong, I put pressure on my daughter and I had my own ideas about who I thought she should be and she proved me absolutely, fundamentally, 100% wrong." She comes to my shows. She saves all my press clippings. She discusses my poems. She watches every episode of *L'attitude*. Her favourite poem is, 'In a Ribbon of Rhythm'.

And the rest of your family?

Oh they are very, very proud but none of them are in this field. It's a world they've never inhabited. Sure they are readers, they love books but the world of creativity is new to them. My mother worked in housing development all my life. She found people homes even when we didn't have a home. My father is an industrial engineer. My younger sister is studying chemical engineering. My elder sister used to work a lot in insurance.

So what has changed?

Noma gave me the confidence that I am talented enough, that I can sustain myself using my creativity. Because of it I have made different choices. I left the TV show, *L'attitude*, as I was burnt out. The Noma has generated interest so the book is going into reprint now.

The Noma Award started in 1979 and is open to writers and scholars whose work is published in Africa in any language. The winner is selected annually by a jury and receives \$10 000. It is sponsored by Kodansha Ltd Japan. The first person to receive this award was Miriama Bâ of Senegal in 1980. "Her So Long a Letter", original French title, "Une si longue lettre", is a classic in Africa. ^{LB}

From 'In a Ribbon of Rhythm'

Tell your story

After they've fed off your memories
 Erased dreams from your eyes
 Broken seams of sanity
 And glued what's left together with lies,
 After the choices and voices have left you alone
 And silences grows solid
 Adhering like flesh to your bones

They've always known your spirit's home

Lay your gentle sway
 To light and substance

But jaded mirrors and false prophets have a way
 For removing you from yourself
 You who lives with seven names
 You who walks with seven faces
 None can eliminate your pain

Tell your story

Let it nourish you,

Sustain you

And claim you

Tell your story

Let it feed you,

Heal you

And release you

Tell your story

Let it twist and remix your shattered heart

Tell your story

Until your past stops tearing your present apart.

Lebo Mashile's book "In a Ribbon of Rhythm" was published by Oshun Books and the Motloatse Heritage Trust in 2005.