

Review

At Risk

Edited by Liz McGregor & Sarah Nuttal, Jonathan Ball Publishers

Reviewed by Vossie Goosen

Is writing and publishing unconsciously one of the last bastions of white privilege? I ask this because I hear two gripes often. Editors grumble about the writing and editing skills of their scribes. Readers lament the quality of some texts, especially among the rich crop of recently published books on contemporary South Africa.

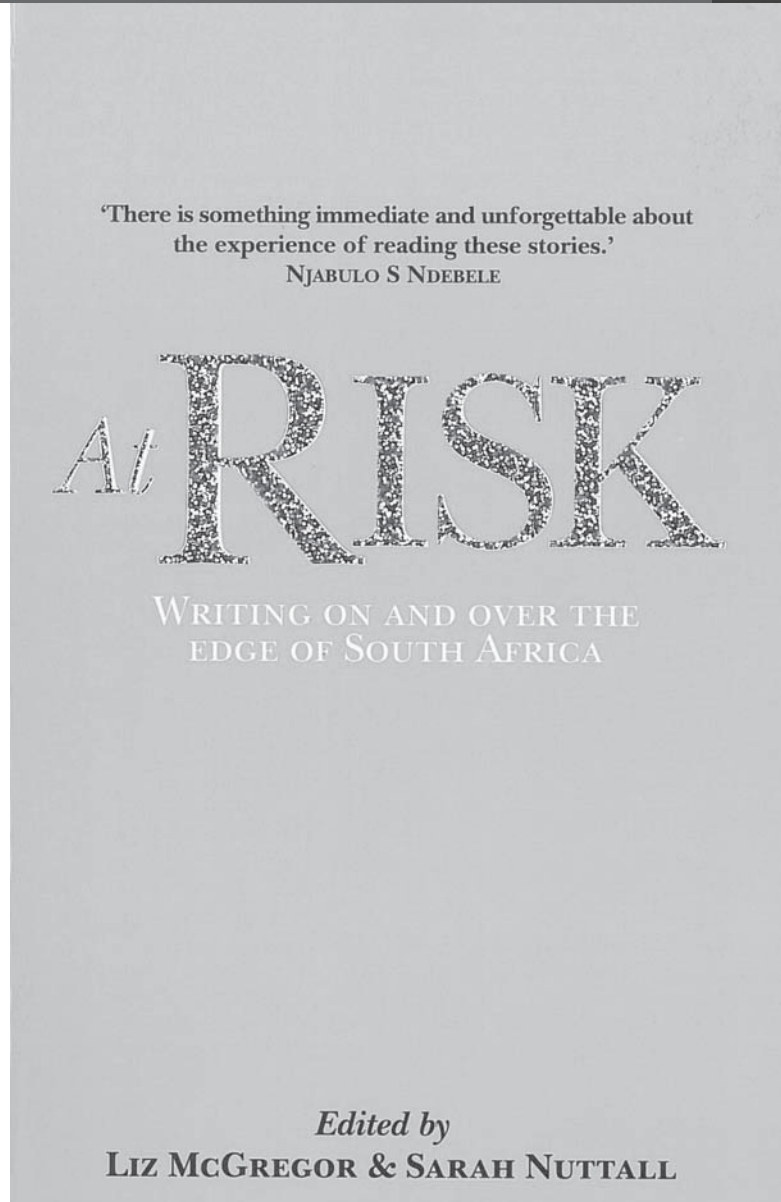
Mostly the writers of the texts in question are black. The grumbling and lamenting imply mistakes in text have something to do with race – as if skin determines the quality of the new books on our shelves. Texts that are put together too hastily often exhibit unevenness. Mistakes put readers off, discourage reading.

How do we deal with publications that are not evenly cured and finished? Whose responsibility is it? The writers'? Why then do we have publishers, editors, copy editors? Where does the buck stop?

At Risk, put out by Jonathan Ball Publishers last year, is a case in point. Here's a highly readable collection of personal narratives by Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (Wiser) staffers. But the rot's there, right inside.

No matter how glowingly the eloquent Njabulo S Ndebele pays tribute from Cape Town to this group of fellow academics in Johannesburg in his sparkling 'Afterword', not even he escapes. Sentence five in his opening paragraph reads: It dare... Sentence five is where discerning readers – browbeaten by grammatical errors in texts – will stop if, like so many browsers, they read a bit from the beginning and the end.

The selfsame set of gremlins visited former Wiser writing fellow Makhosazana Xaba's account of her struggle to become a home owner. There are at least three glaring errors in her text which passed through the hands of the many who prepared the book. Senior researcher Achille Mbembe's 'Why I'm here?' does not only show evidence of lax copy editing, but the translation from French is laboured at times. This is such a pity because many potential readers will be the poorer for not persevering in their reading of his



thoughts on and comparison of South Africa and Cameroon.

Contrast Ndebele's, Xaba's and Mbembe's text with that of their white counterparts and the result is quite startling. For instance, Liz McGregor's 'Who killed the rain queen' appears smooth, even, faultless. Yet McGregor and fellow editor Sarah Nuttal didn't see to it that all the contributions in the book are of a