**Citation: Christopher Van Wyk**

Christopher Van Wyk was born at Baragwanath Hospital in 1957 and grew up in Riverlea, one of the so-called “coloured townships” sandwiched between Johannesburg and Soweto. He would live there for most of his life. A bookworm from a very young age, Chris decided as a child that he wanted to become a writer. While still a teenager, he had a few of his poems published in The Star newspaper. Van Wyk’s poetry and political activism alike were spurred by the Black Consciousness Movement. His commitment to the intellectual liberation of black South Africans espoused by Steve Biko led him into a lifelong project: the production of children’s literature and educational materials.

It is the fate of many South African writers to be known by thousands of schoolchildren and university students for a single work: a poem, novel, short story or play prescribed on educational syllabi or anthologised to the point that, through familiarity, it loses its singular power and becomes bracketed inside a generic label like “struggle literature”. This might have happened with Van Wyk, whose poem “In Detention” – which exposes the brutal absurdity of apartheid state security – has been so widely studied and so frequently quoted since it was first published in 1979 that it has taken on a life of its own. Yet Van Wyk was a figure whose literary activity extended into many spheres, and whose writing style shifted and morphed to suit many different genres (even though his voice remained distinct); his legacy could not be contained within the lines of a single poem.

In the 1980s, he was a key member of the United Democratic Front-aligned Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), editing the journal Staffrider and working in various capacities for its publisher, Ravan Press. The South African literary landscape would have looked very different – would, indeed, have been substantially denuded – were it not for these crucial platforms. Like many of his fellow-writers who employed “the poem as a petrol bomb” in their fight against racism and injustice, Van Wyk faced constant threats and intimidation by the apartheid government. In an ironic twist, he was once arrested and taken to the notorious John Vorster Square prison – associated with the police practice of torturing and murdering activists followed by bland explanations for their deaths, which is precisely what “In Detention” protests against – and warned that if he continued to write such poetry he, too, would “fall from the ninth floor”.

While such circumstances might naturally lead to what Njabulo Ndebele famously described as the “spectacular” literary treatment of life under apartheid, Van Wyk’s prose work also responded to Ndebele’s call for writers to “rediscover the ordinary”. The people of Riverlea and surrounds – their trials and tribulations, their foibles and quirks – are vividly portrayed in Van Wyk’s biography of rugby player and community leader Bill Jardine, Now Listen Here (2003), and subsequently in two celebrated memoirs, Shirley, Goodness and Mercy (2004) and Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch (2010). Indeed, the popular appeal and critical acclaim of Shirley, Goodness and Mercy in particular – not to mention its prescription as a set text for readers at high school and university – temporarily eclipsed Van Wyk’s many other accomplishments.

Van Wyk collaborated with director Janice Honeyman to adapt Shirley, Goodness and Mercy for the stage. Honeyman ascribes the success of the show – “crowds were storming the box-office, queuing out into the precinct” – to “a sense of recognition and identification with the piece ... it spoke not only to his own community from Riverlea and Newclare, but also to those from Sandton, Soweto, Bryanston and Booysens”.

If there is a thread connecting a poem like “In Detention” to the memoirs published three decades later, it is Van Wyk’s sense of humour. In his protest poetry – “In Detention” first appeared in the collection It Is Time To Go Home, which included the work of Soweto Poets like Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Serote, Sipho Sepamla and Mafika Gwala – the humour is bitter, angry, and satirical. In the memoirs, there is levity alongside lyricism, gentle mockery tempering pathos. In between these early and later works, there are outlandish experiments in fiction like The Year of the Tapeworm (1996), described by Rita Barnard as “uncannily predictive in its deep ambivalence about the political transition it records”.

Alongside his own books for young readers, like A Message in the Wind (1982), Petroleum and the Orphaned Ostrich (1989) and Peppy ’n Them (1991), Van Wyk also produced adaptations to make seminal South African texts more accessible. These include Can Themba’s The Suit (1994) and Bessie Head’s The Collector of Treasures (1995), although his major work in this vein was an abridged and illustrated version of Nelson Mandela’s autobiography Long Walk to Freedom (2009), which was published in all eleven of the country’s official languages. Mandela was also one of the icons of the liberation struggle profiled in the Freedom Fighters series (2003-2010). In these thirty short biographies; Van Wyk depicts not just the historical figures but also their social, geographical and cultural contexts: the series becomes an opportunity for young readers to learn about their country in a detailed and varied way. Van Wyk was, as Jay Heale has dubbed him, “A man intent on sharing Africa with Africa’s children”. Van Wyk also produced support materials and readers for adult literacy programmes. In addition, having clerked for the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), he remained a staunch advocate for students in the tertiary sector. He was a mentor to hundreds of young writers, and was particularly generous as a member of the Wits community: encouraging students, giving talks and lectures, and participating in public readings on campus. His connection to the University is one of which we can be proud.

Chris van Wyk’s contribution to literature, to publishing, to education – indeed, to our country’s social, cultural and political history – is not easily measured. One might point to the awards and prizes he received: the Olive Schreiner Prize for poetry, the Maskew Miller Longman Award for children’s literature, the Sanlam Prize for short stories, a South African Literary Award for translation. These can, however, give only a vague indication of his significance and of his place in our literary pantheon. When he passed away in 2014, South African literature lost a gentle giant and it is therefore befitting that the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg bestow an honorary degree on Christopher Van Wyk.