



**Imraan Coovadia** (1970 - ) was born in Durban and attended Hilton College. He currently resides in Cape Town where he is a Professor in the English Department at UCT. His debut novel, *The Wedding*, published simultaneously in the USA and SA in 2001 has been translated into Hebrew and Italian. It was shortlisted for the 2002 Sunday Times Fiction Award, Ama-Boeke Prize (2003) and the IMPAC Dublin International Literary Award (2005). His recent books are *Green-eyed Thieves* (2006) and *High-Low In Between* (2009).

**Wilbur Smith** was born in 1933 in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. He was educated at Michaelhouse, and at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape. As a child he shared his mother's interest in novels, especially adventure stories, where he could immerse himself in the lives of the characters and the places. His concern for the environment and the people of his native land are strongly reflected in his many best-selling novels, beginning with *When the Lion Feeds* (1964) and, more recently, *Assegai* (2010). In an article in *The Guardian* Smith described how his time spent at Michaelhouse "taught me stoicism and to endure."

**John van de Ruit** (1975 - ) was educated at Michaelhouse and the University of Natal (now UKZN). Van de Ruit has performed in a number of productions and highlights include the Johannesburg Naledi award for best comedy performance for *Green Mamba* (2004), together with Ben Voss. Most recently, he is known as the author of the successful *Spud* books set at Michaelhouse which trace the escapades of the eponymous hero. The school looms large as setting, described in detail in the book: "The main quadrangle is surrounded by buildings, which remind me of those medieval castles on our old history books at primary school. We head towards a building that looks older than the rest. Its red brick has faded to peach brick and the moss and ivy are thick as a hedge. The prefects lead us up a dark narrow staircase, through a long dormitory containing about fifteen empty beds and into another dormitory, this one dark and creepy with low hanging wooden rafters and dark brick walls. It is small and cramped with just about space for eight beds. It feels spooky and smells like old socks and floor varnish. One of these eight beds is mine." *Spud* has been turned into a feature film starring John Cleese.

**Jenny Hobbs** (1937 - ) was born in Durban and attended St Anne's Diocesan College. Her short stories have been published in *Contrast*, *New South African Writing*, various anthologies of South African writing, and broadcast by the SABC and the BBC. She is the author of three successful novels, including *Thoughts in a Makeshift Mortuary* (1989) which has been described as a "love story and a lament...to the South Africans of all races who are trying to build bridges rather than blow them up."

**Jonny Steinberg** (1970 - ) was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University, from which he graduated with a doctorate in political theory. He returned to South Africa in 1998 and worked for *Business Day*, writing on the Constitutional Court and the police. He left to write *Midlands*, a book which explores racial conflict in the post-apartheid countryside through an account of an unsolved murder. In 2003, *Midlands* received the Sunday Times Alan Paton Award for non-fiction. Two years later Steinberg's second book, *The Number*, a social history of crime and punishment in Cape Town, received the same award. *Midlands* also received the National Booksellers' Choice award in 2003.

**John Conyngham** (1954 - ) grew up on a sugar farm on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. He attended Hilton College and now lives in the Midlands. He is an award winning novelist and former editor of *The Witness* newspaper. John Conyngham won the 1988 Olive Schreiner award for prose with his first novel, *The Arrowing of the Cane* (1986) set on the North Coast. In a memoir, Conyngham remembers his time at Hilton College: "the overriding impression anyone must have is one of beauty. ... there can be few, if any, schools worldwide that have such an imposing location as Hilton has: the white buildings on the escarpment; the sweep of the Umgeni Valley; the distant glimpse of the Karkloof Falls with the Karkloof Hills behind."

**Kobus Moolman** (1964 - ) has worked as an English teacher and as sub-editor on *The Witness*. While he lives in Pietermaritzburg, he currently lectures in Creative Writing on the Durban campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He has published poetry (see *Time like Stone* 2000; *Anatomy* 2008) and plays (see *Full Circle*, *Stone Angel*); and is a frequent writer-in-residence at the Caversham Press. He has won numerous awards for his work including the Ingrid Jonker Prize for *Time like Stone* and the PANSAs Jury Prize for Best Script for *Full Circle*.

**Fred Khumalo** (1966 - ) was born in Chesterville and grew up in Mpumalanga township near

Hammarsdale, Durban. He now lives in Johannesburg where he is Insight & Opinion editor for the Sunday Times for which he also writes a popular weekly socio-political column. Bitches' Brew, Khumalo's second novel, was joint winner of the European Union Literary Award in 2005. The novel, set partly in the Midlands, focuses on the love affair between Bra Zakes, a former amateur musician, bootlegger, mercenary and killer of great repute and Lettie, a shebeen queen. It traces the couple's lives and loves through the interweaving of history and memory in the tradition of village storytellers.

## **A history of the Midlands**

The Midlands is an inland area of KwaZulu-Natal that lies between Pietermaritzburg and the Drakensberg mountain range. There are several small towns located in the Midlands, including Howick, Hilton, Balgowan, Nottingham Road and Mooiriver. In Midlands, Johnny Steinberg describes the landscape of this area. "The Mitchell property lies on the slopes of one of the most beautiful valleys I have ever seen. It is in the heart of the southern midlands of KwaZulu-Natal, Alan Paton country, and it is true that '... from there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest scenes of Africa'." Fred Khumalo echoes Paton too: "The valley is on the cusp of the rolling hills of the Kwazulu-Natal midlands. Now and then, the observer can see swallows, amatihoye, amaphothwe, swooping down to the valley to drink the pleasures of life. When they emerge, their plumage has a sheen of good health about it. And they are smiling their unique bird smile. And the bees emerge from there humming like a swarm of sailors who've just been to a place of pleasurable sin."

For centuries San people have revered the Howick Falls (kwaNogqaza) as a sacred site. In the uMngeni river gorge below, many years ago, the clan of Chief Ngwenya settled and built stone enclosures for his cattle, the ruins of which are still visible today. In the 1800s European settlers forded the river above the Falls at Allerman's Drift and built homesteads using timber from the abundant forests, killing the last lion in 1856.

The quiet little village of Fort Nottingham began as a tented garrison in 1888 to protect farmers from cattle raids by the Bushmen. The arrival of the railway line from the coast changed the landscape forever and railway stations became centres of activity for the district.

The original mill on Lions River at Caversham bridge was built in 1871 but destroyed in 1878 by a runaway fire. The mill was rebuilt and a century later used as a studio by potter David Walters, a founding member of the Midlands Meander, a popular arts and crafts trail.

An international literary link saw Mark Twain visited the Howick Falls Hotel in 1896 while a more recent political event, the capture of Nelson Mandela in 1962, has been re-imagined in literature. In *Mandela's Ego*, Lewis Nkosi describes how the Special Branch policemen capture Mandela, then a fugitive, "on a fine Sunday afternoon, along a stretch of the Durban-Johannesburg highway" where they had "guided Mandela's damaged little Opel straight into their cordon".

Some of South Africa's top private schools are located in the Midlands, schools which a number of our featured writers attended. However, theirs is a mixed response to the time spent in these Midlands schools - some reminisce about how much they enjoyed school life, while others describe it as an experience to be endured.

### **St Anne's College**

St Anne's, a girls-only private boarding school, was established in 1877 in Pietermaritzburg, later moving out to Hilton. In 1903 the foundation stone of the current College buildings was laid. The red-brick structure is typical of the area and period and an impressive chapel holds a beautiful stained-glass window. St Anne's enjoys the strong support of the Old Girls' Guild founded in 1928, some of whose members went on to become successful authors. The school features, thinly disguised, as 'St Catherine's' in *Spud*. In *Thoughts in a Makeship Mortuary*, Jenny Hobbs describes the 'St Winifreds' school uniform, influenced no doubt by her years at St Anne's: "The school uniform was grey flannel blazer and tunic and a grey felt Breton hat with a badge that had to be worn straight on the head, not tilted (even fractionally) back or sideways. Blazers and hats had to be worn at all times outside the school grounds, even on the hottest day. 'We want people to know that St Winifreds girls are always neat, smart and well-behaved,' Miss Ramsden said in her pep talk at the beginning of each term."

### **Hilton College**

Hilton College is a private boarding school located near the small town of Hilton in the Midlands. It is one of the most prestigious schools in South Africa, and was founded in 1872 by Gould Arthur Lucas and William Orde Newnham, an Anglican priest, as a non-denominational Christian school for boys. It is located on a 17 square kilometre estate. The original school buildings were red brick but with development this changed to the present Cape Dutch style. In

Cheese cutters and Gymslips, Imraan Coovadia describes the exclusive 'club' of Hilton College, whose school motto is 'One of Us'. However, Coovadia writes that he "wasn't destined to be 'one of us'. I was Indian. So were my parents. I was a socialist, more or less, and so, more or less, were my parents. I didn't want to be 'one of us'."

## **Michaelhouse**

St. Michael's Diocesan College was founded in Pietermaritzburg in 1896 by James Cameron Todd, an Anglican canon. James Cameron Todd had a clear idea of what he wanted the school to be. He wrote: "A man's tone, moral and spiritual, as well as intellectual, is largely determined for life by his school." In 1901 the school relocated to Balgowan, when some 77 boys took up residence in the buildings which remain the core to the school to this day. Its name was later changed to Michaelhouse. In his novel *The Hill*, Craig Higginson, a Michaelhouse old boy, describes a Sunday off at a fictional Midlands school: "After chapel, a day of freedom lay ahead. Mr Griffin or one of the other masters on duty usually took a group of boys across to the Mooi River, where some of them floated down the river on tractor tyres and had mud fights. Others preferred to stay at the school and lie by the pool or watch the afternoon film in the hall."

## **Caversham Mill**

James and Richard Hodson built the mill between 1852 and 1853 cutting the wheel buckets out of yellowwood and sneezewood sourced from the local bush. It was the first water driven mill to be erected in Natal. In 1887, a huge veld fire raged down the Balgowan Valley, jumped the Lions River, destroying the settlement at Caversham. Only the church (now Caversham Press) was left standing. For many years the mill stood abandoned until potter David Walters bought it in 1978. He restored the old mill to its former glory and used it as a studio. Walters and fellow potter Ian Glenny conceived the idea of the Midlands Meander at Caversham Mill. In 1987 the flooding Lions River destroyed the mill. In 1996 it again changed hands and became the Caversham Mill Restaurant.

## **Caversham Press**

The Caversham Press was founded in 1985 to afford South African artists access to a professional collaborative printmaking studio for the production of traditional limited edition

prints. Since its inception, it has worked with many notable South African professional artists and writers including William Kentridge and Bonnie Ntshalintshali. The Caversham Press Educational Trust was established as a not for profit organization in 1993. Caversham Education Trust aims to nurture emergent artists and writers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Kobus Moolman wrote the atmospheric poem “Three Trees” during a 2008 writer’s residency:

Three ghosts of trees

Swim on a hillside

In the mist.

Left behind, the light

Of the full moon

Shines a faint trail.

Loud, the river repeats

A stencil of waves

Across the black air.

Three ghosts of trees

Wait for hanging

Three old messages upon.

## **Mandela Capture Site**

On 5 August 1962, Nelson Mandela was arrested on the R103 near Lions River. He had been on the run from the Security Police for 17 months. A monument and plaque were unveiled at this spot in 1996, now a popular stopping point for tourists.

## **Howick Falls**

Howick Falls is approximately 95 meters in height (311 feet) and lies on the Umgeni River. The Zulu people called the falls KwaNogqaza, which means "Place of the Tall One". According to local legend the pool at the bottom of the falls is the residence of the inkanyamba, a giant serpent-like creature. Only sangomas can safely approach the falls and then only to offer prayers to the inkanyamba and the ancestral spirits.

