

AFRICAN FICTION

# Soaring tale of loss and lift-off

**The Theory of Flight**  
Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu  
Penguin

Diane de Beer

On the third of September, not so long ago, something truly wondrous happened on the Beauford Farm and Estate. At the moment of her death, Imogen Zula Nyoni – Genie – was seen to fly away on a giant pair of silver wings ...”

The opening words of Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu’s debut novel, *The Theory of Flight*, grabs readers’ attention with her glorious gift of storytelling. She says a strong connection to her family – and a similar one to Bulawayo, in Zimbabwe, where she was born and raised – informs her writing.

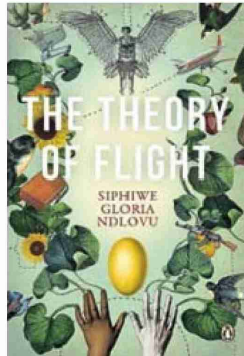
“I am also deeply invested in Zimbabwe’s history. These things not only influence my sense of self, but also inform my writing,” she says. *The Theory of Flight* is influenced by the memory of the place I grew up as a child, Rangemore.”

Ndlovu was born in 1977 during what she calls “the country’s civil war, but what most call the war for liberation and others call the bush war or terrorist war”.

Her grandfather was a political detainee and her grandmother was blacklisted from her teaching profession.

“When my grandfather was released from prison in 1978, my entire family left the country as political refugees. We lived in Sweden and then the US before moving back to Zimbabwe when the country became independent in 1980,” she says.

“I grew up in Bulawayo in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1997 I



left Zimbabwe for college in the US. I lived in the US for 18 years, furthering my education until I received my PhD from Stanford University in 2013.

“When my grandmother passed away in 2014, I realised that I had lived in the ‘diaspora’ long enough and that it was time to come home. I got a job in Johannesburg in 2015 and worked and lived in SA until July this year. I had decided to take a year off to just focus on my writing, so that is what I will be doing, now back in Bulawayo, starting in October.”

Genie’s story tells of her grandfather, who quenched his wanderlust by walking into the Indian Ocean, and her father, who spent countless hours building model aeroplanes to catch up with him.

It is the tale of her mother, a singer self-styled after Dolly Parton with a dream of travelling to Nashville, and of her grandmother, who did everything in her power to raise her children to have character.

The other remarkable thing about the book is the way Ndlovu tells her story. With a grandmother who was a

teacher, she was taught to read from a young age.

“I have always had a vivid imagination and a passion for storytelling. My grandmother used to tell the most amazing stories, so from a young age I was very aware of what a great and wonderful expanse the imagination was. I visited the places in my imagination many times as a child,” Ndlovu says. “I remember standing in sunflower and maize fields lost in my imagination.

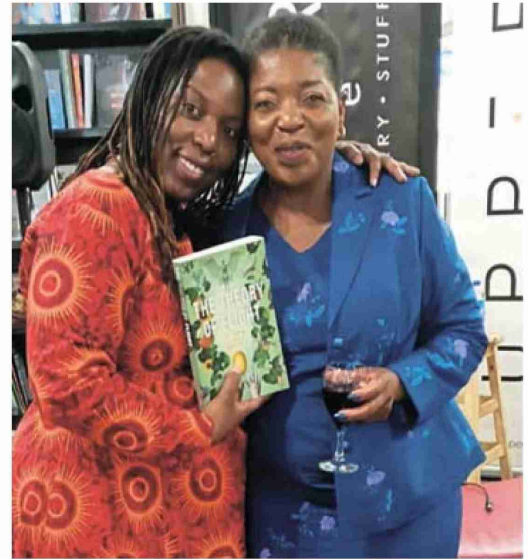
“As my vocabulary grew, I started drawing stick figures whose lives grew more complicated as I grew. In my teens, I started writing general ideas for stories and short stories,” she says.

“I loved reading ever since I started at around the age of four. And at some point it occurred to me that I wanted to be a writer. It was a distant dream, but one I firmly believed I would realise. So at college I studied writing, literature and publishing.”

Ndlovu also has a master’s in fine arts in film and a PhD in modern thought and literature. She started writing *The Theory of Flight* in 2010, while writing her PhD dissertation. The situation was tough because she was losing her heart to her characters but didn’t have time to spend with them.

Ndlovu talks about being a conduit for her characters’ stories. It is as though they come to her and she simply has to listen. She finally finished the first draft of *The Theory of Flight* in 2015.

She cannot remember how the title of the book came to her. The story, she explains, was a means of dealing with the loss of her aunt Sibongile Frieda Ndlovu, who died in 2007, aged 34. “She was four years older



**Family ties:** *The Theory of Flight* author Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu with her mother, Sarah Nokuthula Ndlovu. /Diane de Beer

than me and we had grown up as sisters.”

Ndlovu wanted to explore the many ways people love and lose others. She also wanted to examine Zimbabwe’s history of loss in a civil war, ethnic cleansing, HIV/Aids and genocide. “The country has lost millions of people, all within the span of a generation – what does this mean; who are we now?” she asks.

Ndlovu was very clear that she did not want her novel to be a doom-and-gloom African tale. “I wanted all that loss to be put in the context of all the love that existed throughout all those difficult events in our history.

“I wanted the story to also be about the sunflowers, the

friendships, the loves that people experienced. I also wanted it to capture the way stories are told in this place: anything is possible ... people can fly.”

Soon after her grandfather was released from prison, she saw torture marks on his body. When he told her what they were, her response was that she hated all white people. “He looked at me and asked me what had white people ever done to me,” Ndlovu recalls.

She describes this as the moment that taught her the most, and it runs through her writing with clarity and charm.

Ndlovu is planning a second book in what she hopes will be a trilogy.