

RED BERETS & SILVER WINGS

In Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu's debut novel there is no distinction between the real and the magical, writes **Kate Sidley**

Imogen "Genie" Zula Nyoni, the gap-toothed heroine of Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu's debut novel, *The Theory of Flight*, is said to have hatched from a golden egg. She inhabits an idyllic childhood, playing among the sunflowers with her friend Marcus. Her life changes when adult concerns interfere. Marcus's parents take him away. And soldiers – the feared red berets – bring death and horror to the village.

When the author was just seven the men with the red berets entered her own idyllic childhood on the plot of land her grandfather owned in Zimbabwe. "I remember the sunflowers and having that space to let my imagination run wild. And I also know we had droughts, we had the men with the red berets. My memories of my childhood have to contain both those things. Not to take away from the atrocity, but people are able to go through horrible things and still live and laugh and love each other."

This is the challenge of post-colonial literature, says Ndlovu. "How do we tell the story of where we come from without reducing it to the doom and gloom you see on the TV news?"

The novel is set in an unnamed southern African country – a smart choice which relieves her of the burden of a real country's deep history and inevitable complexity. She is able to look at the issues of Zimbabwe – war and HIV and homelessness run through this book – without them overwhelming the essentially human story, the story of Genie's life, and the author's other themes: love and loss and friendship and the transformative power of imagination.

The tale emerges through the lives of a few families and intriguing characters, from colonial times to the present. There's Genie's father, Golide Gumede, a revolutionary who endured Soviet winters to study aeronautical engineering and build a plane. "because he understood that after the war – when independence arrived – people would need to know that they were capable of flight". And her mother, Elizabeth Nyoni, a self-styled Dolly Parton in a blonde wig, with dreams of Nashville. There are farmers, war veterans, a journalist, street kids and the brutal bureaucrats of The Organisation of



Domestic Affairs.

Ndlovu is a gifted storyteller, skillfully interweaving the real and the magical, beauty and devastation, historical and personal perspectives, simplicity and complexity. She has a vivid imagination and the tale shimmers with magic, though she balks at the "magical realism" label.

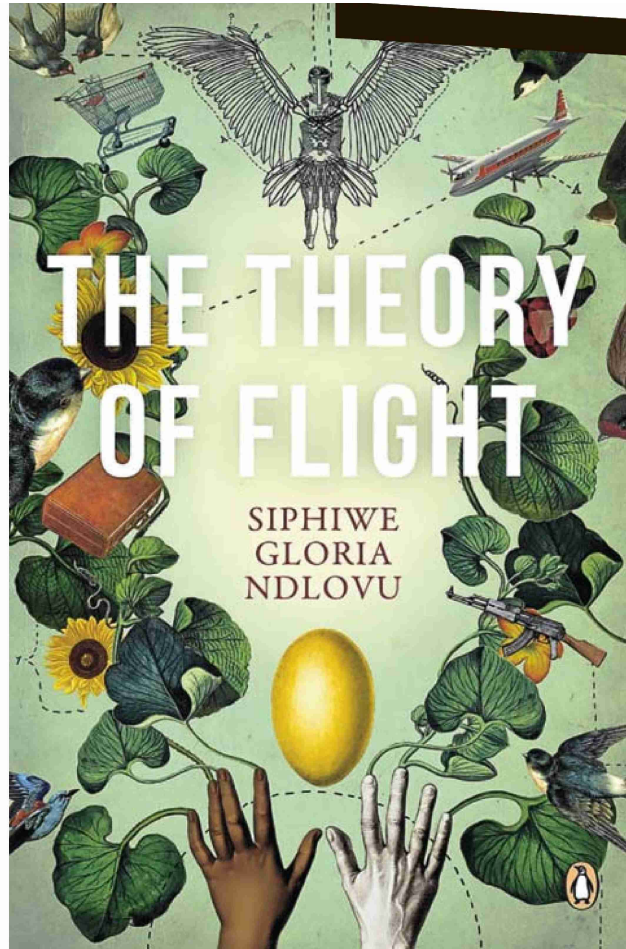
"I simply told this story as honestly as I could, in the way stories have always been told around me, with no distinction between what is magical and what is real. My job as a writer is not to confine my imagination, but to use all the elements I need."

Her background as a filmmaker informs her writing: "It was important to me to try to capture all of what was

happening from the best vantage point I could have. As a writer you have this all-seeing ability but in real life you only see something from a certain angle. So each character sees Genie differently, and she has a definite understanding of herself, even when the other characters don't. When you have multiple viewpoints and voices, there is nuance."

She adds: "I experience the world visually and try to communicate that vision through the careful use of words. If I can't get you to see why Golide has fallen in love with Elizabeth's ankle, then I've failed."

In this case, she succeeds – both in the telling of Golide's ankle-inspired infatuation, and in the book itself, which is a marvellous and unusual flight of fancy. When Genie dies, and flies away on huge silver wings, she will take a little piece of your heart with her. [@KateSidley](#)



The Theory of Flight ★★★★★
Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu, Penguin Books, R270