



Story by Jennifer Krisch
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Writer's paradise

In the Athens County village of Kilvert, Professor Zakes Mda found inspiration for his acclaimed novel 'Cion.'

Students lucky enough to land a desk in Zakes Mda's Creative Writing 361 class are assured of lessons from a master. To them, he may be simply Professor Mda, who expects full effort, genuine criticism and an unwavering desire to write. But around the world, this unassuming man with the big laugh at the front of the room is an internationally acclaimed novelist, considered by many to be the leading South African writer of his generation.

Reviewers of Mda's work use certain words again and again: stunning, exuberant, vivid, rich, essential, masterpiece. For the man himself, there is one description with which no one could argue: prolific. Mda has authored six novels in 12 years, most recently "Cion," published in September.

Yet it was the craft of playwriting that initially drew him to Ohio University.



His country still gripped by apartheid, Mda traveled to Athens in 1981 to pursue a master's degree through the professional playwriting program. First published as a teenager, Mda's career as a playwright had already been well-established in South Africa, and he continued to publish plays in his home country while living in Athens.

He did not begin writing novels until Christmas 1991, when he was tinkering on a new computer and penned the initial page of what became his first novel, "Ways of Dying." Published in 1995, the story introduces Toloki, a professional mourner paid to wail at funerals.

In "Cion," Mda revisits Toloki, whom he brings to America in search of fellow mourners. As he often does with

his characters, Mda places Toloki in his author's locale — in this case, Athens' local Halloween party. Toloki is cautious of and awestruck by this odd celebration of the dead.

Taking up residence with the Quigley family in nearby Kilvert, a tight-knit community of tri-racial settlers who trace their ancestry to African slaves, Irish immigrants and Native Americans, Toloki becomes enraptured with his host family. Of particular interest to him is their slave history, told through generations of handcrafted quilts and the oral histories shared by the women who stitch them.



Toloki is not the only one who finds himself enamored with the residents of Athens County.

"I fell in love with Kilvert and the oral traditions they have there," says Mda, MFA and MA '84. "I really wanted to write about these people — how they came here, their history and how they are today."

Mda first experienced Kilvert from the passenger seat of colleague Jean Cunningham's car as it meandered along winding, uneven roads, past ramshackle houses and the clapboard Church of God before arriving at the very heart of the village — the Kilvert Community Center.

"I took half a day off, put him in the car and drove him out

there," Cunningham says. "It was an overcast day in October and drab. He could have taken one look and said 'No, I don't ever want to come back here.' But exactly the opposite happened. He seemed to want to be involved and immersed in it."

Fascinated by the culture and history of Kilvert, Mda stole away from Athens in spare moments to listen to the oral histories and find inspiration to fill the pages of his novel.

Among his new acquaintances was Irene Flowers, an active 86-year-old whose cheerful smile never falters. Flowers is the soul of the Kilvert Community Center, which she has led for decades. It's where she's stitched countless quilts, a source of the center's operating money, and where she met Mda. She appears as herself in his novel.

"He came out here just exploring. We didn't really know what the book would be about. I don't think I told him all that much, but maybe," she says, attributing this possibility to her demeanor while quilting. "I can really relax when I'm working on a quilt. I can *really* relax."

Mda soaked up Kilvert's stories as he huddled over a sewing machine. The women of the center would have it no other way.

"They said, 'We will tell you, but you must learn to quilt.' So I bought my own sewing machine, and I learned to quilt while they would tell me these oral histories of their ancestors.



In Kilvert, Zakes Mda found inspiration for his most recent of six novels.

Creating that common experience

Zakes Mda's use of Athens County's rich history in his latest novel, "Cion," made it the perfect choice for Ohio University's Common Reading Project.

The book will be used across the curriculum for the next two academic years in a program that gives first-year students a common academic experience meant to ease the transition to college life. It was chosen from among 150 nominated books.

"All of us felt 'Cion' was a wonderful read and a good connection to the area — not just to Athens, but to Appalachia as well," says Sherrie Gradin, director of the Center for Writing Excellence and one of 12 faculty members on the book selection committee.



Irene Flowers (left) and Barbara Suzy Parsons visit with Zakes Mda at the Kilvert Community Center, where Mda heard the oral histories around which he built “Cion.”

“Quilts are part of the culture of Kilvert. If you go there today, you will find the women quilting. Some of the women have quilts from their great-great-grandmothers, and they believe the designs and symbols were used by their slave ancestors to find their way from the South across the Ohio River. It is part of the tradition of Kilvert.” He pauses. “But I am a lousy quilter.”



The story of “Cion” is woven through the quilts, and that is by no means an accident. Some historians argue that slave map quilts simply do not exist, that the history is fabricated and that the stories grow more grandiose with each generation’s telling. There is no written historical record of the practice, they argue.

But the people of Kilvert believe it is so, record or no record.

“I use the novel to illustrate this debate,” Mda says. “I use the quilts as a portal to revisit the past.”

It is kinship — with university, Athens and Kilvert — that keeps Mda from returning to South Africa just yet. Following the completion of his master’s degrees, Mda traveled back to South Africa, eventually obtaining his doctorate at the University of Cape Town. In 2002, he returned to Athens to accept a Department of English visiting professorship in African literature, expecting to stay just a year. But a permanent teaching position in creative writing became available, and both the department and Mda envisioned a good fit.

“My children fell in love with it here, and they loved their school,” Mda said. “And I fell in love with Kilvert, so I thought I might as well stay.”

Accolades for ‘Cion’

The *New York Times Magazine* says Zakes Mda “may have a more central place in South Africa’s literary and political spheres than any other novelist today.” And with the release of his first novel set in the United States, Mda is quickly establishing himself with American critics and readers as well.

This year, “Cion” garnered nominations for an NAACP Image Award and the 2008 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for the Best Book in the Africa region.

Essence magazine chose the novel as its September 2007 Book Club selection, saying, “Zakes Mda’s new novel offers a haunting look at our past and future in a story that seamlessly blends fact and fiction, keen observation and biting satire. ... (It) speaks to the struggles and contradictions of life in this country.”

And *Publishers Weekly* calls the novel “exuberant, rich and original.”

Other books by Mda

“Ways of Dying,” 1995, M-Net Award for best novel; Olive Schreiner Prize

“The Heart of Redness,” 2002, Hurston/Wright LEGACY Award for Fiction; *New York Times* Notable Book; Best Book, Africa Regional Commonwealth Writers’ Prize; Sunday Times Fiction Award



“The Madonna of Excelsior,” 2002, *New York Times* Book Review Summer Reading Selection; American Library Association Notable Book

“She Plays with the Darkness,” 2004, Sanlam Literary Award for Best Unpublished Novel

“The Whale Caller,” 2006, the only one of Mda’s books that hasn’t won an award, although he considers it his best work



For a Q&A with Zakes Mda, visit *Ohio Today Online* at www.ohio.edu/ohiotoday/.