



Margie Orford

Crime writer with a mission

By Helen Vale

I love to teach, I love to tell stories, I am very curious about the world and people and how we somehow manage to love and build families despite war, despite the dangers we face, despite the knowledge we have that we will live and struggle and die in the end. I always have this feeling that there is so little time and so much to do. So I get on and do it."

Margie Orford - university lecturer, writer of crime thrillers and children's stories, journalist, film director, trainer, researcher, campaigner and activist, editor, feminist, wife and mother - shares her experiences and advice with the readers of, *Sister Namibia*.

Shaped by Namibia

Namibia is the place that formed Margie and where her memories really begin. Her parents moved to Windhoek in 1972 when she was only seven years old. After leaving to study English at the University of Cape Town she returned to Namibia in 1990 and lived here with her husband and daughters for another ten years.

These were the formative years of her adult life. She did everything she could fit in – teaching at UNAM – English literature and publishing, and working as an editor for Jane Katjavivi when she set up New Namibia Books. Margie made films – documentaries. She wrote. She co-edited a book on Namibian women's writing called *Coming On Strong* and it was a revelation. She really found out about the country that she had grown up in – half-blinded as so many of us were by apartheid. It was an amazing time of learning and growing.

In 1999 Margie left Namibia again to complete a Masters in Comparative Literature at the City University of New York, returning to Africa in 2001, this time to Cape Town where she and her family now live.

Imagining another world

What challenges does Margie see for women in South Africa and Namibia? "Simply staying alive seems to be quite a challenge for many. It is a rough and violent and often misogynistic place where many women are extremely poor. But it is also a place that has opened up enormously for women: legally, socially and artistically. I

sometimes think the biggest challenge

might be finding the courage to take on all that freedom, and to make the most of ourselves. Fear of success – fear of flying – holds many women back.

"Go! Fly! Dream yourself into what you want to be, what you want to achieve. You have to be able to imagine the world before you can take it over!"

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Speaking out against violence

Margie Orford is the patron of Rape Crisis in the Western Cape. She explains that sexual violence is so debilitating – on the women who are subjected to it, on their children and loved ones, and on the truncated, blunted, brutal men who rape with seeming impunity. So she acts and speaks on behalf of Rape



Margie Orford with her first two crime thrillers at the Book Den in Windhoek

Advice to Namibian women

- Get to know yourself (strengths and weaknesses).
- Get to like yourself (good and bad) and believe in your dreams (impossible or not!)
- Get your own education.
- Save your own money.
- Pay your own bills.
- Buy your own house.
- That way you will make your equality a reality.
- That way you will make yourself safe and secure.
- Those are the building blocks for making your dreams come true.

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Crisis, using the public voice she has gained through her writing. This is important for women who have survived sexual violence - and for the commemoration of those who have not survived. Their stories and struggles and bravery and resilience need to be remembered and celebrated.

Becoming a crime writer

Last year Margie Orford's third novel in the Clare Hart series was published. *Daddy's Girl* is set in Cape Town and follows on her bestsellers *Like Clockwork* (2006) - also based in Cape Town - and *Blood Rose* (2007) set in Walvis Bay.

What turned her to writing thrillers? Well, she loves a good story – and thinks sometimes that contemporary literary fiction lets you down. She likes writers who grab her attention immediately and hold her, with a strong sense of place and social context.

As an investigative journalist she found that she could tell the facts in an article but not always get to the truth. "In fiction one can get to an emotional truth that lies beyond a mere listing of the facts." She did not plan to be a crime writer. She wants to tell a good story about places and people. The question for her in South Africa and Namibia is this: Why are so many men so violent? And why

do they cause so much harm? She finds that the investigative novel – the thriller – is a way of answering those questions.

Working with prisoners in South Africa

Margie taught a creative writing course to a group of fifteen maximum security prisoners. Out of this came the book *Fifteen Men, Words and Images from Behind Bars* (2008).

She recalls that this was a harrowing experience in many ways – these are extremely damaged people. They are the men we fear. And yet in them were the shadows of the little boys who had been lost and abandoned and abused along the way. She is not a very liberal-minded person when it comes to punishment for violent crimes. But she does think that our society fails its sons – and that fathers in particular fail their sons by too often being absent, by being violent, by being drunk.

The men she worked with learned to write – to reflect on their lives and to find ways to empathise – this she could see from the progression in their writing. But her view is that men need to take responsibility for their children and learn a new way of being a man – a way that involves strength instead of hardness – if we are to alleviate the amount of violence we all endure. ♀