

ARTS & CULTURE ■ NATIONAL ENGLISH LITERARY MUSEUM



Bringing Our Story Home

Some of our finest minds tell South Africa's story at the new 'green' National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown

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The new National English Literary Museum (NELM) is South Africa's first 'green' museum.



TOP LEFT: Giant letters spelling LITERATURE invite visitors to linger. LEFT: Early European travellers to South Africa often wrote about what they expected to see, rather than the reality, as illustrated here in a detail of Cyril Coetzee's *T'kama Adamastor*. ABOVE: NELM's signature: giant pencils.

The three Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) are in rude health in Grahamstown. In fact, the biggest R is a favoured hiding place for children playing games in the swanky new National English Literary Museum (NELM), the first 'green' museum in the country. A tumble of giant letters spells out LITERATURE in the main exhibition hall and I watch as a group of playful youngsters dart in and out of them.

"It's turned out to be a child-friendly space," says NELM exhibitions curator Tom Jeffery, delighted with the positive reception of South Africa's first Public and Education Building to achieve a five-star Green Building Council rating for both the design and completed project.

This is no stuffy museum. It's a celebration of South Africa's multiple cultures and the way we see ourselves, reflected in our literature through the centuries. The Department of Arts and Culture forked out some R145 million to

turn dreams into reality and allow NELM to move out of its cramped old offices into a modern building worthy of our vibrant local cultures. Completed in 2016, it's already a must-visit landmark in Grahamstown and the Eastern Cape.

On a tour of the bold and bright *Voices of the Land* exhibition, Tom kicks off with a poem by Dia!kwain of the /Xam, transcribed by Lucy Lloyd and Willem Bleek. Called *The Broken String*, it laments the loss of the First People's land to colonisation.

Europeans viewed Africa as a strange and exotic place and often wrote about what they thought they would see, rather than what actually existed. "Albertinus de Virga in his world map of 1415 marked the Garden of Eden in Southern Africa," points out Tom. "And John Barrow, one of the early travellers to visit, was convinced the unicorn lived in this southern paradise, after he saw a painting in a cave."

Dutch explorer Peter Kolbe's drawings of wildlife during his visit to the Cape in

the early 1700s were not very accurate and his 'sea cow' looks more like an oversized dog than a hippopotamus. "Olive Schreiner was one of the first to write from a home-grown point of view," says Tom. Sol T Plaatje's *Mhudi* was the first novel by a black South African, and NELM is proud to have in its collection the woodcut Cecil Skotnes did for the cover illustration.

Glass cases display original copies of poems and manuscripts by luminaries of the South African literary scene, such as poets William Plomer, Roy Campbell and Siphon Sepamla. The NELM collection contains more than 111 000 original manuscripts, housed in a special climate-controlled archive that has a flat roof planted with vegetation to minimise energy requirements.

The modern museum uses multimedia to tell our stories. Stand beneath a sound dome and you hear the sound track of the movie on the screen in front of you; plug in headphones to hear a commentary, story or poem. Tom taps

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a touch screen and a menu of South African places pops up. Select a town and choose a poem about that place. I choose Cape Town and chuckle at Adam Small's *Oppie Parara* about the flower sellers, then Grahamstown and muse over Don Maclennan's *The Sun Has Gone*.

Protest writing, censorship, resistance and the rise of Black Nationalism are reflected in the literature of the apartheid years, with authors such as Nadine Gordimer and Miriam Tlali writing of dissident realities. The dawn of democracy gives way to a theme of the tarnished rainbow, where Jeremy Cronin's poem, *To learn how to speak*, is prominent. "His reference to the voices of the land is an important theme, which we used in putting together this exhibition," says Tom.

It was a challenge organising such a wide-

ranging exhibition and it took a staff of 25 five years to do so, acknowledges Tom. Tracking down illustrations was a particularly tricky job.

NELM was founded in the 1960s by the late Professor Guy Butler, poet, author and head of the English Literature Department at Rhodes University for many years, to counter the cultural poverty in this country. He challenged his contemporaries to throw off the colonial yoke and write about life from a local perspective.

Today, NELM houses the world's most comprehensive collection of South African literature in English, from author manuscripts and published works to theatre programmes and photographs.

This year marks the centenary of Butler's birth, and Zongezile Matshoba, NELM's education and public programmes manager,

says a series of special events will be held to mark the occasion. "This is a living space. We want people to feel at home here," he says, putting out cushions in the storytelling circle to invite children to listen to tales.

NELM has an active outreach programme for local schools. I catch up with education officer Basil Mills at the dress rehearsal of a play with a strong environmental message, which he has written for Holy Cross Primary School. The child playing the eaglet that can't fly looks suitably sad as she asks the other animals for their help, and meerkats, snakes, a lion, porcupine, zebra and buffalo play their roles with gusto. "All the costumes are home-made," says Basil. "The buffalo horns are made with pieces of my old surfboard."

He believes that every child loves a story as it helps them bring out their own imagination.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Exhibitions curator Tom Jeffery says what we choose to remember and celebrate of our past is a political act. ● Historic as well as contemporary authors, such as Sindiwe Magona, feature in NELM's Voices of the Land permanent exhibition. ● South African films also form part of the Voices of the Land exhibition. ● Festivals and events at NELM include a programme of readings from the work of prominent South Africa authors.





ABOVE LEFT: This is the woodcut by Cecil Skotnes that was used to illustrate the cover of Sol T Plaatjie's *Mhudi*, the first novel in English written by a black South African. ABOVE: NELM's veteran storyteller, Basil Mills, shows off the cyborg sculpture he made out of scrap metal that forms part of the dystopia section of the exhibition.

It's also a way to explain things to them so they can make sense of their world and the problems they face. "This way of teaching is better than just telling facts," explains Basil. "And storytelling brings people together."

Basil is the longest-serving member of staff at NELM and started working with Guy Butler in the early 80s, first as an exhibition officer, then as educator. He uses the indigenous gardens at NELM to engage children in a world far richer than that of sitting passively in front of a television screen.

The new complex has a small outdoor amphitheatre and a kraal with a central fireplace, as well as an intimate auditorium indoors. It's been designed to minimise energy consumption and maximise self-sufficiency – rainwater harvested from the roof is used to flush toilets and to irrigate the waterwise garden of indigenous plants, and occupancy sensors ensure that office lights are not left burning when no one is around.

"The original brief required a sustainable building. However, the project went beyond that and was entered as one of the pilot projects for the Public and Educational rating tool of the South African Green Building Council [SAGBC]," says Cobus Gouws, director of

ABOVE LEFT: Stormwater retention dams in the indigenous garden contribute to the museum's five-star green rating. ABOVE RIGHT: NELM's education and public programmes manager Zongezile Matshoba films Gedisa Mpande performing a poem. RIGHT: The team who worked on the 'green' museum (from left to right) Cobus Gouws, Lungisa Gongxeka, Willem van Niekerk, Rob Gillard, Fezeka Mvulana and Werner de Lange. (Picture: Luke Masters)



Intsika Architects, that designed the building. "It's also the first building in the Eastern Cape to achieve five green stars from the SAGBC. It's a special attraction for Grahamstown."

It's fitting that Grahamstown is the home of NELM. The Eastern Cape has been a crucible of much of our literary talent – think Olive Schreiner, Athol Fugard, JJR Jolobe and the Lovedale Press coterie of writers. Judging by the energetic participation of schoolchildren in NELM's storytelling outreach programmes, the seeds of our literary tradition are sprouting a new generation of talent that will continue to pen their own interpretations of our magnificent land. ■

Map reference F6 see inside back cover

NELM in a Nutshell

- NELM is an agency of the Department of Arts and Culture and is an associated research institute of Rhodes University.
- Once Parliament passes the necessary act, NELM's mandate will expand to include all of South Africa's indigenous languages and it will get a new name.
- NELM has two satellite museums: the Eastern Star Gallery, a printing and press museum in Grahamstown, and Schreiner House in Oudtshoorn.
- National English Literary Museum (048 822 7042, info@nelm.org.za). Find NELM on Facebook and watch out for its revamped website www.nelm.org.za.