

# Provocatively Poised...

## A voyeuristic view of an anthology

Throughout recorded history erotica has had a constant and consistent presence, more often than not breaching the mainstream, but for all the wrong reasons. Then, referred to and thought of as offensive and immoral, this natural, primal and necessary form of expression has had to endure bad public relations from the get go. Thankfully a lot has changed since then and if you were not aware a coming out party of sorts took place at the inaugural National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences Digital and creative awards last year when *Adults Only* won the Edited Fiction Volume Award. This piece seeks to celebrate the brave contributing authors and daring author, who chose to articulate what so many of us think but never say.

Without further ado, may I present to you Joanne Hichens.....

**Q: What about Joanne Hichens influenced or inspired "Adults Only"?** *Adults Only* was the second in the Short.Sharp.Stories Awards series of anthologies powered by the National Arts Festival of South Africa. The first was a volume of crime fiction stories titled *BLOODY SATISFIED*, so it seemed almost logical to go from crime to sex! No, in all seriousness, I decided on the theme around the time the sleazy *Fifty Shades of Grey* came out and readers were fascinated and appalled at the same time by this sexual romp. I had tried to read it but couldn't get beyond the first few pages. But I was struck by the world-wide sensation of this novel. I found the sexuality so limited, although fantastical and appealing to a certain audience. And I thought, yes, love, lust sex and sensuality will be the next theme for the Short.Sharp.Stories Awards series.

**Q: Choosing from 150 entries could not have been easy. What were the basic and mandatory elements required in order to make the cut?**

The stories always have to be well written. Beyond that we look for that illusive quality called 'voice'. Voice is the tone, the imagination of the writer which translates into the kind of prose that one can't put down, even if it needs editing and honing. We look for stories that have good narrative drive, a decent structure, a story that moves along, that keeps a reader guessing as to what will happen next. Although we allow a certain amount of experimentation, the whole idea

of the series is to publish accessible, readable fiction, which showcases established and new talent in South Africa. For this volume I wanted men as well as women to tell their stories; I wanted to include a range of characters and their sexuality; I wanted humour; I wanted tough-talking sex tales; we included space for the *Fifty Shades* kind of entertainment, but mainly I wanted a broad spectrum of what it means to be sexy and sensual in South African fiction, and by extension, in reality.

**Q: Penned erotica, in the South African literary landscape is somewhat under represented. Do you agree? If so why do you think this is?**

Yes, certainly I agree. I think it goes back to the pre-1994 days when the legitimate literature was struggle literature. Then after the elections the opportunity existed to be free, to explore every sort of story, to celebrate every sort of writing, crime fiction, memoir, you name it, and erotica falls into this new phase of experimentation. The romance genre is thriving, but erotica — this sort of fiction with more of an edge — I think publishers may be a little wary of that. Perhaps we need to be less prudish, less prescriptive around sexuality. There is space to play and have fun with fantasy in erotica, so why not publish more of it?

**Q: In your opinion what role does exploration and acceptance of sexuality play in defining identity?**

Sexuality is a continuum. The lines are blurred. With around thirty listed legitimate gender identities — whether you're lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer-asexual — there's space for personal expression. As far as exploration goes, most young people experiment around their sexual identity. Pushing boundaries is par for the course — and individuals are free to do so, as long as consent exists between individuals, and no one ever gets hurt. Honesty around sexual status and health is imperative. Of course acceptance of sexuality is key to a whole identity. The self-stigma that has existed in the past, as well as societal stigma, is lessening. In general, each of us has to learn to accept and to celebrate who we are, and this applies to our sexuality as well. The aim of *Adults Only* was to present stories of a sexual and sensual nature for



Joanne Hichens

Picture: Roxanne Kotze

reading value, but also to create a safe fictional space in which readers could gain insight into different kinds of sexual identities or roles that are practiced. I also wanted readers to sit up and recognise that there's more substance to men and women, and to sex and sensuality than *Fifty Shades*.

**Q: In respect of recognition and positioning of the genre, what impact did winning the inaugural National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) Edited Fiction Volume Award 2016 have?**

That was a Wow! moment. Even to be shortlisted was a Wow! moment. *Adults Only* was our second title, as I mentioned, we'd just finished work on the

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third title, *Incredible Journey*, and to be honest, although I love the project, I was starting to wonder what impact it had in broader, and in literary, society. The aim of the project is to create a platform for SA fiction, written by citizens as well as permanent residents who have equally important South

African stories to tell, and I was wondering if the project was being noticed as an important platform — which I think it is. It is in fact, the only annual volume devoted entirely to publishing SA short stories. So when I won the prize, I was thrilled, not only for myself, as I put in a lot of effort into the

project, but also — and especially — for the writers, to whom I paid forward part of the prize money. I was gratified to know there's a place for Short.Sharp.Stories, and pleased for the sponsor — The National Arts Festival, and of course the publisher, Tim Richman of Burnet Media. The recognition has meant a great deal and it spurs one on to greater heights. The NIHSS Award was a stamp of approval and this goes a long way to ensuring funding of projects like this.

**Q: Share your thoughts and feelings about the exposure the NIHSS Digital and Creative Awards creates as an annual platform?**

At the inaugural event, I realised just how fortunate I

was to be in the company of so many fabulous authors, and creatives, who were shortlisted in the different categories. So much talent was on show, in digital media, in documentary making, in visual communication. This was breathtaking. One knows the talent is out there, but to get glimpses of it, to hear and see what people are doing, left me with a euphoric sense of hope. The awards event was fantastic, with the NIHSS Head Dr Sarah Mosoetsa in attendance, and Minister of Higher Education Blade Nzimande giving an address. The atmosphere was electric. I really felt this to be an important and innovative Awards — it seemed to me to be out of the bounds of the kind of literature 'cliques' of the current establishment. We need forward-thinking, out-of-the-box types of initiates, and my feeling is the NIHSS Awards is such an initiative.

**Q: South Africa has made many positive and progressive strides in recognising, protecting and celebrating sexual diversity and expression. Which area do you feel needs more attention and why?**

Tolerance in general is still lacking. And this is in reference to almost every aspect of South African life, whether it's our politics, our humanity, our culture, or sexuality. We have to create an atmosphere of tolerance. Each to his own. To encourage celebration around difference. And again, not to hurt, or ostracise any person whom we perceive as different, or who does not share our views. Very sadly South Africa not only has one of the most forward-thinking constitutions of the world, and was one of the first countries to legalise gay marriage, but the term 'corrective rape' was coined here, and remains a blot on the landscape of sexual, and human, rights.

**Q: Which story in the anthology do you believe is most reflective of South Africa today (in context)?**

The stories, read as a whole, reflect the sexual and sensual habits of a range of characters. One story is no more important than another: Bear in mind too, that in some of the stories the sex is off-page, rather than being explicit. A number of stories are raunchy and lusty, but others centre around love, which is sometimes unrequited. The stories of longing, which evoke sensuality, are for me the most moving. I would agree that the story named as Publisher's Choice has resonance to your question. Tiffany Kagure Mugo's 'Coming In to Self Awareness' is energetic,

humorous, overflowing with sex and sensuality, and wonderfully African. This is a story of women coming into their own, getting to grips with 'the orgasm', but also has a sub-theme of Africa coming in to her own. I loved this story for the sheer exuberance of it. The introduction, penned by Makhosazana Xaba, is worthy of mention. In her thoughtful, reflective essay, Xaba talks of how we have come a long way from the sodomy laws and immorality act ... 'I welcome *Adults Only* where bodies and sex are located at the centre of the human experience. The stories help us to claim our humanity in its varied and multiple sexual ways... too long have sexual topics been shrouded in silence, confusion, doubt, shame, misunderstanding and even controversy...' In a nutshell, Xaba emphasizes the need for honesty.

**Q: To non patrons of the genre, why should "Adults Only" be on the must read list?**

Top authors such as Ken Barris, Wamuwi Mbaio, Arja Salafranca and Bobby Jordan, as well as exciting new writers such as Sean Mayne, Tiffany Kagure Mugo, and Lidudumalingani Mqomboti are featured. The collection is a smorgasbord of love, lust, sex and sensuality — and we all need more loving in our lives. We also need a challenge — this collection provides just that as some of the stories are provocative and edgy. I try to include, in each anthology, a range of stories, which become more than the sum of its parts. It goes without saying that some readers will prefer some stories to others, but it's an honest, at times gritty, at times nostalgic and heart-wrenching take on sex and love of all sorts.

**Q: Can we look forward to a 2017 entry (NIHSS Awards)?**

Yes. In fact I have entered the anthology *INCREDIBLE JOURNEY*. It's unlikely that I'd win again, but I think the value of entering is that one is bringing the written South African word to the attention of those who can really help writing along, who can support writers and editors, and ensure we maintain a vibrant writing and publishing community. Literature needs support to flourish, and the NIHSS offers just such support. With the humanities floundering in the face of so much effort put towards the sciences, it becomes even more important that South Africans read — in order to become better thinkers, better writers, better at understanding concepts of all kinds, and better at understanding each other.

BY: ZUNAID OMAR

## BIO

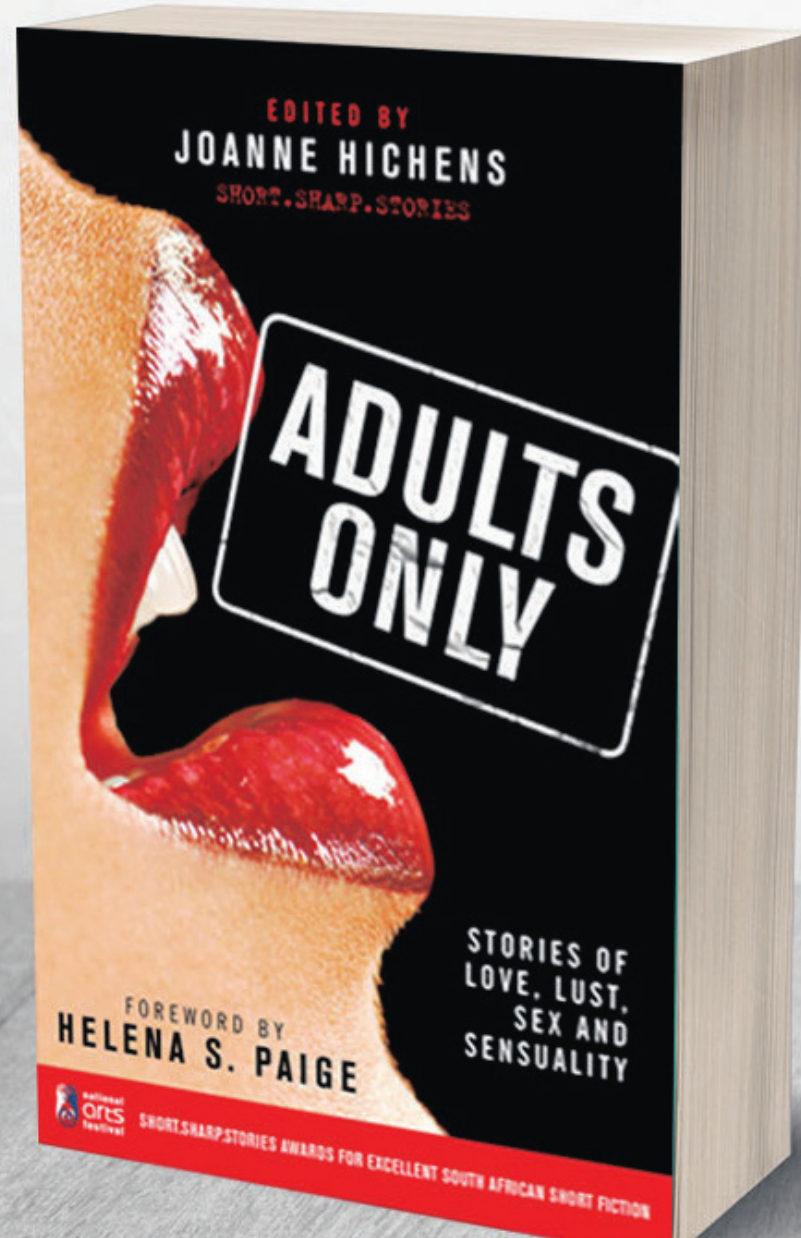
Joanne Hichens holds degrees in art and psychology and worked as an artist, university lecturer, and group facilitator at a psychiatric clinic before completing a Master's degree in Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town. Since 2003 she has worked as author, journalist and editor. She has taught creative writing at the University of Cape Town and at Rhodes University, and continues to be affiliated to UCT.

Her first published crime-fiction novel was *Out To Score* (with Mike Nicol, 2008). *Divine Justice* (2011) and *Sweet Paradise* (2015) followed, both which feature PI Rae Valentine, an amputee-junkie-Cape Town based detective who works part time as a motivational speaker. Joanne's Young Adult novel, *Stained*, was shortlisted for the 2010 Sanlam Prize for Literature and has since been published in England and France. She has edited six collections of short stories, including *Bad Company* — South African crime fiction stories (2008), *The Bed Book of Short Stories* (2010), and as curator of the Short.Sharp.Stories Awards, *Bloody Satisfied* — stories of crime fiction (2013), *Adults Only* — stories of love, lust, sex and sensuality (2014), *Incredible Journey* — stories that move you (2015), and *Die Laughing* — stories of wit, satire and humour (2016). She was awarded the National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences Award (NIHSS) for *Adults Only* in the category Best Edited Collection. The next in the series, *Trade Secrets* will be published in 2017. She lives in Cape Town with her three children.

She is currently writing a memoir, as part of her PhD studies through the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

"I apply the same work ethic to whatever project I tackle, be it crime fiction, non-fiction, or editing or teaching. I am committed to creating and encouraging work of a high standard. In my writing, I am interested in exploring the fractured nature of man, and society, but am equally interested in the healing of those fractures towards establishing a more whole and inclusive humanity" — Joanne Hichens

A collection of stories of love, lust, sex and sensuality. Within these pages lies a wonderful range of modern sex writing: stories that are raw, dangerous and powerful, as well as those that are delicate, sensitive and poignant; provocative stories that titillate the senses, as well as perverse stories that are riotously funny. Erotica, tragedy, comedy, drama (but not quite pornography). An anthology from established authors and rising talents, *Adults Only* is South African short-story writing at its best. *Adults Only* is the second Short.Sharp.Stories annual anthology, produced in conjunction with the National Arts Festival.



## ABOUT

Introduction by Makhosazana Xaba

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