

NAMIBIAN CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH LITERATURE WRITTEN IN ENGLISH



ELWYN JENKINS

Department of English Studies
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa
ejenkins@mweb.co.za

ABSTRACT

This article examines 15 works of fiction written in English for children and young adults which have a Namibian setting. The earliest was published in the 1920s and the latest in 1998. The books are examined in order to ascertain what the Namibian setting has contributed: whether the authors have engaged with the history of the country; what they make of the setting; and whether there are any particular plots and themes that emerge. A notable trend in the English-language books published after the 1960s is that they focus on the personal growth of the protagonists. Rather than serving as a background for adventure, as the earlier books did, the Namibian settings and social circumstances serve as catalysts for psychological drama, while the landscapes with their flora and fauna play out as objective correlatives to the characters' interior struggles. In keeping with this subject matter, the writing is usually sensitive and lyrical.

KEYWORDS

Namibian literature, Namibia, children's literature, youth literature

1 INTRODUCTION

Namibia has a character and mystique of its own, and its literature has its own character. This article examines works of fiction for children and young adults in English published up to 1998 in order to ascertain what subject matter, themes and plots the country has offered this genre. The cut-off date was suggested by the publication of the *Namibian Children's Book Forum Award Bibliography* by the Namibian Children's Book Forum (Töttemeyer, Alexander & Loubser 2010), which covered the Forum's awards for books in all Namibian languages from their inception in 1988 until 2000, when they ceased

because of the paucity and poor quality of submissions (Töttemeyer 2012). The awards were renewed in 2012 and covered the period retrospectively to 2001, but the details have not been published and consequently the fiction of this latter period has not been included here.

Töttemeyer (1997:120), the undisputed authority on Namibian children's and youth literature, defines it as 'either books published for children and youth in Namibia, or books for children and youth with a Namibian theme, published outside of Namibia in a language spoken in Namibia'. What the books selected for the present study have in common is their Namibian setting. Most of the authors either live, or lived for a time, in the country.

In matters of language, authorship, publication and readership, children's and youth literature set in Namibia has ties with the youth literature of South Africa. As in South Africa, a large proportion of its children's books are written in Afrikaans and most of the rest are in English, which is the predominant language of South African books. The remaining few books are written either in the indigenous languages of Namibia or German. Many of the books were written by South Africans, many were published in South Africa, and most of the readers would have been South Africans.

The languages of publication reflect the colonial history of the country and the post-independence policies of the government. German colonial rule of South West Africa ran from 1884 to 1914 (Töttemeyer, Kandetu & Werner 1987:15). In the nineteenth century, Afrikaner trekkers and other Afrikaans-speaking people, such as Hendrik Witbooi and his followers, settled there. For much of the twentieth century, until 1990, the country was a protectorate of South Africa, run as a *de facto* fifth province, during which time many Afrikaners settled there as farmers, government officials and civil servants. Töttemeyer (1997:119) observes, 'Afrikaans ... has dominated the language scene for the past seventy years.' 'It is the mother tongue of Afrikaans whites, Rehoboths and Coloureds, while most Nama and Damara people use Afrikaans, especially for written communication, and it is a common lingua franca for other ethnic groups' (Töttemeyer 1997:120).

While the government recognises 13 languages, English has been the main official language since independence in 1990 and is the medium of instruction in schools from Grade 4 (Maho 1998:166, 192). A revision of the language policy for Namibian primary schools, which entails the extension of mother tongue education up to and including Grade 5, was announced by the Ministry of Education in March 2014, to be phased in as from 2015. In the 1991 census (Republic of Namibia 1993), 1.2 per cent of the population gave English as their first language; 17.5 per cent listed Afrikaans; 3.8 per cent listed German; and the remaining 77.5 per cent listed an indigenous language. The actual numbers are very small: for example, in 1991 there were only 45 560 Afrikaans-speaking and 3 064 English-speaking children under the age of ten.

The literature has not been fully documented. Töttemeyer (1997:122) records that 'there are hardly any comprehensive bibliographies of Namibian juvenile literature'. Critical surveys and literary analysis are also scarce. Haarhoff's full-length study, primarily of colonial literature, *The wild South West: frontier myths and metaphors in literature set in Namibia* (1991), and a follow-up article by Chapman (1995) on the voices of indigenous people, deal only with adult literature, though some of what they have to say is of interest in the study of the youth literature. Töttemeyer (1997) has written the only comprehensive survey of Namibian youth literature in all languages. Reviews of some of the English books are available from various sources, and two novels that were translated from Afrikaans into English are discussed in articles on Afrikaans Namibian books in the reference works on Afrikaans youth literature edited by Kruger (1991) and Wybenga and Snyman (2005).

This article looks at 13 novels for young adults and two books for slightly younger children (one a collection of three stories) that were published in the period from 1920 until 2000. Some of them were recipients of the Namibian Children's Book Forum Award. They were published in South Africa, except for two that were published in the United Kingdom (UK).

Other categories of books included in the Book Forum bibliography, but not covered in the present study, include five books for young children, some of them picture books, and 12 books of folktales or contemporary stories contributed by participants in oral literature projects. These last two categories are notable mostly for having been published in Namibia, often in a number of languages. Various other books in different languages, such as a collection of plays and stories produced by the Namibian Children's Book Forum for its annual Readathon, are also listed in the bibliography. South African children's literature in English includes books of San folktales and stories about San hunter-gatherers (Jenkins 2006:123–149), but they have been excluded from this study because they are not specifically tied to Namibia.

2 FICTION EMBEDDED IN HISTORICAL EVENTS

As might be expected, the fiction is embedded in the history, the landscapes with their flora and fauna, and the peoples of the country. The three novels that are tied specifically to historical events coincidentally mark three turning points in modern Namibian history. *The great thirst* (1976) by Jenny Seed is set at the end of the precolonial period that ran from 1730 to 1870, which was marked by turbulent population movements, the arrival of explorers, traders and missionaries, and the growth of economic ties with the Cape (Wallace 2010:45). *How we baffled the Germans: the exciting adventures of two boys in South-West Africa* (c. 1920) by Eric Wood is set in the war between South African government forces and the Germans, whose defeat in 1914 brought German colonial

rule to an end. The succeeding South African protectorate of South West Africa was formally terminated by the United Nations in 1966, which confirmed the name Namibia in 1968, but independence came only in 1990. *Song of Be* (1991) by Lesley Beake is set during voter registration for the first democratic elections after independence.

Taking these books in the order in which they were written illustrates the way the fiction has changed over the years. Wood, the author of *How we baffled the Germans: the exciting adventures of two boys in South-West Africa*, published in *Nelson's Adventure Library for Boys – Nelson Adventure Series*, was an Englishman who also edited *The British Girl's Annual* for 1921. It is so obscure that it does not appear in any database of Namibian or South African youth literature, nor is it mentioned by Haarhoff, but it is worth noting because there cannot be many novels set in the South West African campaign of 1914.

In the way it is written it is in many respects an anachronism, typical of the adventure stories that Scottish and English writers such as G.A. Henty set in South Africa in the nineteenth century, ending with the Anglo-Boer War (Jenkins 2002). Typical features of this genre that are replicated in this novel are its tedious length; it has dual heroes whose adventures split them up, enabling the author to cover simultaneous but geographically diverse aspects of the campaign; detailed knowledge of the campaign; boy heroes who dash from one theatre to another, free from the restrictions of normal military service, performing impossible deeds of derring-do that draw them to the personal attention of great men; little interiority in the portrayal of the boys; little description of the countryside, though detailed in its geography; perfunctory attention to the morality of war and its implications for personal ethics, the lessons for readers being rather the value of courage and loyalty; treacherous foreigners and their Afrikaner sympathisers; and a jingoistic loyalty to Britishness – all this written in slightly archaic prose. The story ends with General Botha congratulating the boys and giving them letters of introduction to take to England, where they intend enlisting in the Great War. It continues: 'And the boys knew that the far-away look in his eyes meant that he, too, would have liked to be going with them to fight elsewhere, as he had fought in Africa, for the Empire that stands for freedom and justice' (Wood c. 1920:318).

Seed's *The great thirst* and Beake's *Song of Be* are the two Namibian youth books that have attracted the most international interest: the former controversial, the latter unremittingly admired. *The great thirst* is set at the time of Jonker Afrikaner, who figures prominently in the story. Although her novel appears to be the only one that has attempted to portray the complex events of his life that changed the history of the country, Haarhoff does not mention it. As Seed's historical note explains, just at the time that immigrating Hereros were displacing and suppressing the Khoikhoi, the half-caste Afrikaner and his band, displaced from the Cape, invaded from the south. Afrikaner set up his capital in what became Windhoek, and invited white missionaries to settle there and traders to bring guns and ammunition. In Seed's novel, as time goes by, Afrikaner's rule dissolves in greed, drunkenness, treachery and mass slaughter.

The events are seen through the eyes of a Nama boy, Garib, who joins Afrikaner to seek revenge for the death of his father at the hands of the Herero leader, Kahitjene. The novel is typical of Seed's historical novels that are set in various periods of South African history in that the central character develops a moral sense that distinguishes him or her from the norms of those around him – he must exercise personal choice in the face of historical determinism (Jenkins 1993:109–128). The central feature of the book is the portrayal of Garib's inner struggles, as he wrestles to reconcile the missionaries' teachings with the traditional values of his upbringing, and to balance his loyalty to his benefactor, Afrikaner, with his growing rejection of violence and vengeance. Though he has the opportunity, he does not kill Kahitjene. When the fighting is over, he becomes a man of peace and offers his services at a mission station as a cattle man. The novel ends with his vision for South West Africa, which Seed wrote knowing that the next era of violence, as horrific as that of Afrikaner's time, would be the German genocide of the Hereros: 'They had come a long way already. The people might still hate each other, but were they not, if only for a short while, all dwelling together in peace in the same town?' (Seed 1976:191).

Seed and her Namibian novel have been attacked by some American critics. An early criticism, given prominence in the United States (US), came from the African children's book specialist Schmidt (1985), who accused Seed of a narrow, eurocentric view of history and a predominance of negative stereotypes. In their book, McCann and Maddy (2001:110–112) depart from their stipulated dates and geographical zone to include *The great thirst*. They endorse Schmidt and scorn the South African critic Heale (1996b) for defending Seed. McCann and Maddy (2001:110–112) argue that Seed uses African characters to act out 'selected Biblical passages suggesting the nobility of submissiveness', although Seed (1975:184) writes explicitly, 'He [Garib] did not need the missionaries or Tomarib [a traditional teacher] to tell him that he too had done wrong. He had known it within himself all along.' They accuse Seed of writing 'grossly sensational descriptions of the non-Christian world', and argue that she says the missionaries introduced 'Western cultural customs' that 'only exacerbate alleged African weaknesses. These include indolence, drunkenness, opium [sic] addiction, hedonism and a malicious trickery' (McCann & Maddy 2001:110–112).

Whether Seed exaggerated is open to question. As was her standard practice, she undertook a lot of research to unravel the complicated events of the time. The historian Wallace (2010:69) describes the war between Afrikaner and the Hereros as 'probably the largest fighting in Namibia to that date'. McCann and Maddy (2001:110) complain that Seed portrays the fighting as 'frenzies of madness' and 'mayhem'. Seed (1976:145–146, 163) generally avoids details of the fighting, using instead generalised terms, such as 'terrible battle', 'everywhere there was fighting', and 'whole clans were slaughtered'.

Heale (1996a:22) has described the book as 'certainly one of [Seed's] greatest books ... It certainly does indicate that white civilisation is a desirable end, but Jenny Seed also shows how the arrival of white traders brought the dangers of alcohol and debt'. He has

also written, 'Not only is this well-researched, exciting storytelling, but it also portrays the effects of a clash of cultures. Thoughtful, worthwhile reading' (Heale 1985:71). Another South African critic, Davies (1992:148), has judged that this and Seed's story about San children, *The new fire* (1983), were 'two of Seed's most successful books': 'An excellent novel ... At the outset Jonker Afrikaner is a fine leader worthy of respect, but we witness his downfall as a result of his thirst for power and then his craving for the alcohol of the traders.' The novel is sufficiently even-handed for young readers to be aware that reading it intelligently entails appreciating complexity in making judgements.

McCann and Maddy (2001:112), citing Steve Bantu Biko, rehearse the argument that white writers such as Seed should not create black protagonists and try to write black history. For the Namibian books in the current study, the race of the writers and the protagonists is usually immaterial, and I am aware of only one instance apart from Seed where the author's race became an issue, namely, when the publisher of Erna Müller's 1994 novel, *Diamond*, insisted that she use an indigenous pen name, 'Pashukeni Penda', in order to give it more appeal to black readers.¹ That was in the early days after independence, and no such reservations appear to exist today. For example, Töttemeyer (1997:131) describes German books that 'protest against colonialism and oppression', 'present the colonial past from the perspective of the Nama, Herero and Rehoboths', and feature interracial friendships.

Beake, a Scottish-born South African children's writer, has written two stories with indigenous Namibian protagonists, *Tjojo and the wild horses* (1990) and *Song of Be* (1991). Beake (1993:26) is aware that she has opened herself to accusations of cultural appropriation, and has discussed what is involved:

The most quoted advice given to would-be authors is to 'write about what you know', and this is very valid and very true. But the definition of what you know deserves some elaboration ... We need to be able to write about the experience of others ... I let *them* tell me ... You have to have the speech patterns, the thought patterns, the feel of the time.

In an author's note to *Song of Be* she acknowledges with thanks the assistance of the Ju/'hoan people and the Nyai Nyai Farmer's Cooperative, with whom she worked for three years, and she later explains:

I listened to tapes and read transcripts of the only Ju/'hoan documents in existence (then), which are the talks around the background to the first election in Namibia. I talked to many domestic workers and used the library of the Women's Bureau in Pretoria for newspaper and legal background (Beake 1993:26).

Contrary to the hostile reception of Seed's novel in the US, the American Library Association named *Song of Be* a 'Notable Children's Book' in 1993 and 'Best Book for Young Adults' in 1994. It has been published in many foreign editions. In Namibia, it received the Namibian Children's Book Forum Award in 1996. Beake has written many

books set in South Africa, where she has twice won the Percy FitzPatrick Prize, but *Song of Be* has not been honoured there.

Song of Be is a powerful psychological novel. It conveys the stifling isolation of the farm on which Be lives with her mother, the housekeeper who has become the white farmer's concubine, while his wife, Min, descends into madness – she literally becomes the mad woman in the attic – ending in suicide. Be is a modern young woman: she goes to school before going to the farm, and Min teaches her English. Be's struggles to find meaning in life and a future for herself are interwoven with the political situation of her people. Min tells her the San have not developed over the last 100 years, and Be clings to faith in her people's traditional culture, until Khu, the modern young election official, who is travelling the country encouraging his people to register to vote, tells her, 'It's no use trying to go back, back in time, back to an old life that doesn't – that can't – exist any more' (Beake 1991:73). At a personal level, she realises the importance of being open to possibilities: 'I thought what you *had* was important; now I know it is what you *are*' (Beake 1991:12). The novel has a startling time frame: it opens with her words, '*I have just killed myself*' (Beake 1991:1), since she has stabbed herself with a poisoned arrow. This is followed by the entire action in flashback, and ends with Khu finding her and assuring her the arrow was harmless. She ends, 'I thought that maybe I should open my eyes again' (Beake 1991:74).

Song of Be is one of only two novels in English published before 2000 dealing specifically with the liberation years, the other being *On the run* (1994) by Kapache Victor (cited by Töttemeyer), about students pursued by security police. Töttemeyer (1997:136), writing of youth fiction published before 2000, remarks on the absence of novels dealing with many aspects of the liberation years and post-independence, such as 'the experiences of Namibian children in the military camps and schools in exile', whereas according to Haarhoff (1991:5), writers for adults in the 1980s focussed on 'militarism, total onslaught, total strategy and the deconstruction of the frontier'.

3 THE WILD FRONTIER SETTING

The main appeal of Namibia to writers of youth fiction has not been its history but rather its exotic, rugged and empty landscapes. Its aura of oddity and mystery was cultivated by the few writers in English whose non-fiction about the country, written for adults, reached South African readers in the first six decades of the twentieth century – John Marsh (1945), Lawrence Green (1952), Frank Haythornthwaite (1956), Henno Martin (1957), Thirza Nash and Olga Levinson. Their yarns of the desert and picturesque characters created a kind of mythical history. The country, with its Sperrgebiet, camels, wild horses, diamonds, desert and great rivers, and the coast with its shipwrecks, seals, guano, crayfish, fish and canning factories, offered a novel setting for fiction of adventure and survival. From 1950 onwards, Afrikaans authors produced a steady stream of youth

books of this kind, in which boys proved their manhood, pitted against the country and its crooks (see Kruger 1991; Wybenga & Snyman 2005).

In this mid-century period, only one English-language work of children's fiction with a Namibian connection appeared: *The river path* (1964), written by a Pretoria estate agent, Sheila Brathwaite, who also wrote an adventure story set in the Mozambique Channel. The idea was suggested to her by a holiday spent by her schoolboy son, Hugh, who undertook a canoe trip down the Orange River to the sea. The frontier, in this case, is the river country on the border between Namibia and South Africa. Jim's typical holiday on his uncle's farm leads to a hectic trip down the Orange, pursuing a gang of diamond smugglers. The book has a protagonist, but no single focaliser and no interiority in depicting the characters.

Although Brathwaite chooses an exotic setting, she conveys little of the country and its people. During the pursuit of the crooks, leopard, hyena and scorpion take their predictable toll, while descriptions of the setting are perfunctory – 'Once ... they disturbed a huge flock of Egyptian geese' (Brathwaite 1964:52). The characters are stereotypes. Her portrayal of indigenous people would today be considered racist: 'Old Bali, headman of the local tribe ... was a rheumy-eyed old man, with grey peppercorn hair and a shrunken, bony, lithe body, but he was full of dignity' (Brathwaite 1964:13); the Africans speak an indeterminate, literary, pidgin English; and as was sometimes the practice with other white South African writers in the first half of the twentieth century, she uses an American image for a black person when she calls a woman in a Richtersveld store a 'mammy' (Brathwaite 1964:36).

The book was popular and was reprinted in 1968. In its plot, characterisation and prose style it is typical of the scanty generation of South African English-language youth books that drew to an end in the 1960s (Jenkins 2006:10–11).

4 NAMIBIA AS MORE THAN JUST A SETTING

From now on, Namibia would play a role in novels that had as their focus the inner lives of their main characters. The country, and more particularly its creatures, provided the catalyst or objective correlative for the internal struggles of the young people.

Two novels from the 1970s broke the mould of superficial adventure stories by focussing on the psychology of the characters, while the setting played a more symbolic role than that of simple backdrop. One was Seed's *The great thirst* (discussed above), the other a novel by Freda Linde, *The singing grass* (1975), which has had more attention paid to it in South Africa than any other Namibian young adult novel (see, e.g., Wybenga & Snyman 2005:317 and the reviews reprinted in Kruger 1991:196–199). This is partly because it was written first in Afrikaans, as *Die singende gras* (1973), and the author

was one of South Africa's most admired and discussed Afrikaans youth authors, who translated it into English herself. *Die singende gras* was awarded the Scheepers Prize for the best Afrikaans youth novel for the years 1971–1973, the W.A. Hofmeyr Prize, and the Namibian Children's Book Forum Award. Linde also wrote a picture book illustrated by Ann Walton set in Namibia, *Die keiserkroon* (1984), which has not been translated. It was awarded the Tienie Holloway Medal.

The singing grass is a multi-layered novel of symbolism and unspoken significances. Lance, a withdrawn and stuttering teenager, is employed at an isolated hotel to look after a camel, Yesha, which the owner keeps in an enclosure. Everything at the hotel centres on the camel and the caged life everyone leads at the hotel. Their relationships change as the plot develops. The owner's wife dislikes the camel because it symbolises her own cooped-up, isolated life (a theme later echoed by the farmer's wife in *Song of Be*). The camel is the focus of Lance's existence, and he longs to set it free, just as he longs to be free himself. This is conveyed in a passage typical of Linde's poetic writing: 'Already the sun was pleasantly pricking the bare skin of his arms and legs. Surges of heat were rising from the ground, almost as if the heat was trying to lift him, too. "I would then glide along," he thought, "not walk"' (Linde 1975:1).

The eponymous grass, too, has significance for the characters: profit for the owner; memories for his wife of her blonde hair as a young woman; golden silk for the city-dwelling friend who visits her and tries to entice her away; and for Lance it makes music – the stalks 'rubbed a muted string music against the leather of his boots' (Linde 1975:1) – and provides him with the means of caring for Yesha. In a sub-plot, a telltale residue of grass is the clue to the guilt of the dishonest handyman.

Like the other characters, Lance bears a burden – in his case, the burden of love. He sets out on a heartbreaking journey – a familiar motif at the core of the story – to deliver Yesha to a nature reserve, but it dies on the way. Yet the loss liberates him, as he is offered a post as a trainee game warden at the reserve.

The singing grass set a pattern for the Namibian novels to follow. The central characters are not the macho young heroes that South West Africa had produced in the past, but sensitive, lonely, troubled boys. *Scowler's luck* (1990) by Jay Heale is another story by a South African about a South African boy undertaking a journey along a river in Namibia, but the difference between it and *The river path* indicates how the fiction had changed. Heale creates a complex boy from Cape Town, Jac, whose parents have moved to a better suburb so that he can go to a rather posh school which they can barely afford. Arriving in Grade 7 among boys and girls who have been at school together for years, he keeps his distance from them and finds schoolwork boring. When a teacher, Mr Robertson, organises a school hike down the Fish River Canyon,² he is reluctant to go, knowing also that his parents cannot afford it. But they raise sponsorship from his godmother and borrow equipment for him.

In this story, the Namibian setting is not just a backdrop to adventure, but provides the milieu in which Jac can find himself. Unlike books in which the harsh countryside tests a boy, in this story the Fish River Canyon proves that Jac already has resources that bring him respect from his companions. Heale (1990:29) carries the story forward with lively dialogue and brief, accurate, descriptive details of the spectacular canyon, such as, ‘Jac couldn’t help noticing the constantly changing colours of the rocks. Streaks of black and white, or a sudden change to rusty green.’ Jac soon realises that his faded khaki clothes are more suitable than the others’ flashy outfits, and as the hike progresses, his knowledge of the veld (he knows what a *halfmens* and a *kokerboom* are) and how to hike and camp and cook make him indispensable. He secretly helps the class bully when he gets lost, earning his gratitude and respect. Mr Robertson and his wife spell out to him the self-worth that he should appreciate – he is rich because he can make friends, and his schoolwork problems are caused by a learning disorder that can be treated. ‘Mr Robertson was actually taking an interest in who he really was – the Jac inside him. No teacher had ever bothered to do that’ (Heale 1990:88). The others decide he must have a new nickname because he is smiling, not scowling, and a pretty girl invites him to share a lift home with her parents.

5 PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DISTANCES

Parents, and the absence of parents, play a significant part in the modern stories of troubled youngsters. In *Song of the surf* (1988) by Dale Kenmuir the divide between father and son is extreme. Young David’s alienation from his rugged, distant father is exacerbated by his horror at his father’s involvement with other men in planning to kill seals because they believe they are destroying the fishing and guano industries. As background to David’s personal story, Kenmuir, who had worked as a fisheries scientist in Namibia, presents a balanced account of over-fishing, the culling of seal pups, and the declining guano industry, and explains how scientific conservation can provide a sustainable future. (For a fuller discussion of this book, see Jenkins 1993:99–101.) On a metaphysical level, David learns about the interconnectedness of all nature and how humans cannot find lasting happiness by bonding only with wild creatures. Despite its dramatic plot, this is a surprisingly tender story by Kenmuir, whose other youth books feature gung-ho game rangers in Zimbabwe.

In several of the books, one or more of the parents are away, either working on mines or in towns, or have deserted the family. The father of the camel boy Lance, for example, works at a canning factory in Walvis Bay, which leaves Lance responsible for making his own decisions and way in life. While the books are not overtly political, this background of social dysfunction is a bleak reflection of the consequences of earlier apartheid policies and the rapid modernisation of the economy since independence.

Other examples are *Flash flood* (1990) by Jenny Winter, *Match point* (1998) by Erna Müller and *The price of a chicken* (1997) by Pieter Pieterse, which are discussed below.

Two stories see boys with absent fathers journeying through the Namib Desert. In Beake's second Namibian story, *Tjojo and the wild horses* (1990), the theme of tension between fathers and sons is played out in the lives of four sets of characters, with a parallel among the wild horses. Tjojo runs away from home because he thinks his father has rejected him, but after his experiences in the desert he understands the stress his father was under and decides to return home. Life, he learns, is not a matter of stark alternatives, but of finding a balance, just as the balance of nature means that survival for the horses includes necessary deaths. The novel is full of humour, especially in the dialogue. Beake makes fun of the traditional legends of diamond smugglers, as do other recent children's books which portray criminals as petty, bungling crooks. In this case, the crooks Tjojo thought were diamond thieves turn out to be second-rate crayfish poachers.

Dorian Haarhoff's children's story, *Desert December* (1991), is a Christmas fantasy about Seth, who lives in the Kuiseb Canyon with his grandfather and mother while his father works at a copper mine. When his mother goes to the mine village to have a baby, Seth sets off in a donkey cart to take her gifts. On the way he is rewarded for three gifts that he gives: he is guided by an oryx which he helps by taking a piece of barbed wire off its leg, and two old men whom he helps give him Nara veldkos and a piece of copper ore. He finds his parents and gives his mother 'a driftwood Madonna, light as laughter', that he has carved. He gives the baby the Nara plant and copper rock, and sings his oryx song to her. Haarhoff's poetic style and the songs and poetry he includes enhance the magical delicacy of the story.

6 MODERN CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS IN A MODERN WORLD

Haarhoff's stories are Namibian through and through. Not only are the physical settings, the characters, the animals and the plants local, but the plots emerge from these elements. After *Desert December*, he wrote three more stories for young children, contained in *Legs, bones and eyes: a children's trilogy* (1994). The settings are strongly localised in Namibia, and casual references to an uncle working in a canning factory in Walvis Bay and twins killed in 'a raid in the war' place the stories in Namibian society and recent history. Two of the character's names – a girl nicknamed 'Legs' and a dog called 'Shoe' – echo the names of the characters Shoes, Bag and Walking Stick in the traditional San stories collected by Lucy Lloyd in *Specimens of Bushman folklore* (1911).

In all three stories the central characters experience some emotional tension which, while it cannot be explored in depth because of the shortness of the story, has an

uncomplicated immediacy that would capture the attention and sympathy of a young audience.

‘Legs’ race’ has a precise setting in Windhoek: ‘The race started next Saturday in Zoo Park. You ran out of the park gate, then you had to run up the hill, round the church, past the whitewashed fort, through the school grounds, past the stone castle, down the steep road and back into the park’ (Haarhoff 1994:1). Before the race, Legs (Lepanda) runs to save her uncle who has had a heart attack, and exhausts herself; luckily the race is postponed and when it is held later she comes second.

‘The mud hole’ concerns a mud hole that bubbles in the desert. A pair of twins takes an irascible old man there to be cured of a weak ankle, and at the end the three become friends. This is the true healing that the mud hole brings about. ‘Chameleon vision’ concerns Ringo, a short-sighted boy, much teased by other children, who lives in a village in dry country near a dam. There used to be mine nearby, and Ringo becomes a hero by ringing its bell to warn the villagers when the dam breaks.

In *Flash flood* (1990), Winter combines modern life with a dramatic setting on the Kavango river. Her skilfully constructed story inserts flashbacks in the exciting narration of an adventure that rises to a climax paralleling the personal tension in the life of the protagonist, Cliff, a teenage boy. Cliff used to live in the north, where his father is a conservationist, but his mother divorces his father and moves to Johannesburg to marry a sophisticated man with two children. Cliff has to accompany her, but hates his new life and family. Cliff is offensively rude towards his mother, stepfather and new siblings, and there are poignant scenes in which the other children try to appease him. When the three children have to spend a holiday with his father while the new couple go on honeymoon, he plans to run away and live in the bush until the adults realise how serious he is about staying at the Kavango, where he would like to follow in his father’s footsteps. On a trip on the river, their boat is wrecked in a flood and his father injured, leaving Cliff to go for help. He eventually reaches an army base and the soldiers (apparently South Africans stationed there during the border war) rescue the family.

Cliff’s ordeal forces him to reassess his life and change his ways. The lessons he learns are rather didactically spelled out at various points in the book:

Perhaps it wasn’t too late; perhaps he could repair the things he’d broken. Perhaps he could forgive and be forgiven, just as he could forgive the river and still love it despite what it had done to him ... ‘People of the river always come back,’ he remembered Olavi’s words. ‘No matter how long the road is they have to walk before they return’ (Winter 1990:109).

His interaction with the setting takes on symbolic significance: nature stands for the world, in which he is going to have to find a way of accommodating himself. The setting has a special potency and piquancy because it would be alien to most readers, but Winter deconstructs any romantic notions of idyllic, unspoilt bush.

Winter was the wife of the prolific Afrikaans children's writer, Pieter Pieterse, whose books she translated into English. His book, *The price of a chicken* (1997), the translation of *Om 'n kerie te keer*, springs from their stay in the Caprivi, where he was made a member of the Mafwe tribe. It depicts the struggle of a rural boy to relieve the extreme poverty of his family through the application of modern business methods. Tuba, a young teenager in Grade 8, has schemes for making money. He goes through some hard and disappointing times before he succeeds with the help of a free-spirited young white man, Rusty. In the end, modern entrepreneurship prevails: the old-fashioned storekeeper's monopoly is broken and Tuba and Rusty's schemes bring better times for all in the village.

The price of a chicken is remarkable for its humour. Pieterse handles the potentially tricky topic of clashes between modern life and traditional ways of life and conservatism by turning it into comedy. Tuba teaches Rusty how to treat his grandmother:

[Tuba whispered] 'Perhaps it would be better if you clapped hands before you spoke, sir. And bend down a little to show your respect the way the Mafwe people do when they're speaking to someone who's their superior. Like this.'... The fun was back in his blue eyes. The man clapped. Tuba clapped too. Grandmother kept walking. They clapped so loudly, their hands hurt. Eventually she turned. Her eyes sliced through them.

'Mushimani! Youngster!' Her lips curled around the word. 'Don't even know how to behave towards your superiors.'

'What did she say?' the man whispered.

'She says you may speak now, sir. We must sit on the ground.'

'I'll fetch my camping chair.'

'I'm afraid you can't do that, sir,' Tuba whispered (Pieterse 1997:22).

The novel carries a message for the young post-independence reader, of racial interaction that develops into understanding and appreciation of the culture of 'the other'.

Whereas Kenmuir, Beake (in *Tjojo and the wild horses*) and Heale write about the angst of pubescent children, Müller, a South African-born writer who teaches in Windhoek, writes about young adult lives. Her characters are urban teenagers. She wrote *Diamond* (1994) under the pen-name of Pashukeni Penda. Its central character, 15-year-old Ndeshipanda, is a city girl, and the story opens in a Windhoek that is unpleasant but authentic:

A dry, dusty wind swept through the streets and over the sidewalks, blowing up papers, plastic bags and other rubbish, lifting up women's dresses so that they had to hold them close to their bodies with both hands.

The wind made the people's faces look cold and hard, for their eyes were almost closed to protect them from the dust.

It was a wind that came from the west, a hated wind, a feared wind. Every day promising clouds gathered in the sky at about midday and gradually grew thicker, mushrooming up into the sky until they looked like huge cauliflowers. The people watched and hope flickered in their hearts as they thought, today, surely today, the rain will come and fall on the bone-dry earth that aches for it ... In Windhoek, the capital city, to which more than four hundred people came monthly to find work, the water supply was becoming dangerously low (Penda 1994:5–6).

The plot shifts to the coast north of Henties Bay when Ndeshipanda is caught up in a rather implausible adventure involving diamond thieves. Though the setting is now the desert, nature is not a significant factor as it in some of the other books such as *The singing grass*. What redeems the novel is the way the author views diamonds:

Would she be able to explain what she really felt? That she had realised that in their country there were things even more precious than diamonds? That, when she looked at the diamond, she saw the hardness of the land, and the dryness of the earth it came from? That it made her remember her own thirst, and the thirst of the land in one of the severest droughts they had ever had? That she saw the reflection of water, Namibia's most precious thing, in its sparkle? (Penda 1994:121).

Whereas previously diamonds had been prominent in fiction and non-fiction as objects of financial value and hence of ruthless greed, in this novel Müller puts them into perspective when the future of Namibia is taken into account.

Another novel by Müller, *Match point* (1998), combines two plots, namely, competitive high school tennis and love, which provide tension and suspense. Although the main characters belong to different racial groups this is no barrier to friendships. The three boys on whom the story focuses show good and bad sides – their tensions, moral dilemmas and bad moods. Good handling of dialogue takes the story forward. Müller considers the potential of Namibia for a modern story, and conveys the sense of a young country that is rather isolated. The Windhoek setting, with the matchbox houses of Katutura, the neat white bungalows of the new suburbs, and the dry climate, is harsh. South Africa is down the road, enticing with its promise of opportunity for young people; while Namibia is a small country where sport struggles, the schools are not well off, and parents want their children to go to a foreign university.

The social scene is topical. Sean is a modern youth linked to a gang who smoke dagga but are not otherwise engaged in criminal activities. He used to live on a farm while his mother was away in the city; she would bring him to the city and smother him with affection and presents before disappearing again. Later he moved from one relative to another, and he now lives with his aunt and her 'narrow-minded' husband, who shows him no affection (Müller 1998:26). Sean makes his girlfriend Angeline pregnant, but will not marry her. But decency, generosity and love are to be found in their lives in Windhoek. By the end of the book, Angeline has a new boyfriend and will go to the University of Natal after she has had the baby, who will be left in the care of her mother.

Sean seeks a new life in South Africa, and Angeline's boyfriend obtains a sponsorship to attend a tennis academy in the US.

7 CONCLUSION

Children's and youth literature written in English that is set in Namibia goes back to the 1920s, but it has been little studied. The landscape, peoples and history of the country are what distinguish it from its neighbours, and the literature set in the country has likewise made its own contribution to children's and youth literature. This article shows through the chronological analysis of 15 English-language books published before 2000 how the fiction has changed over the years.

Throughout this period, the Namibian setting is prominent. At first it provides a landscape that makes adventures possible; later it stimulates and symbolically parallels the psychological growth of the central characters. In three novels, significant events in the history of the country feature. In the earliest, *How we baffled the Germans*, the war of the South Africans against the Germans provides the opportunity for the non-stop incidents of the plot. *The great thirst* follows in detail the confusing events of the time of Jonker Afrikaner while exploring the moral development of the central character that is precipitated by the violence. In *Song of Be*, the first democratic elections bring to crisis point the adaptation of a San girl to the modern life that is her destiny.

The river path is typical of the bland South African children's literature that marked the mid-century transition from the adventure stories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the psychologically and socially concerned literature of the latter part of the twentieth century. While the stories in *Legs, bones and eyes: a children's trilogy* are evocative of the lives of children in the different parts of the country where they are at home, in *Scowler's luck*, *Tjojo and the wild horses*, *Song of the surf*, *The singing grass* and *Flash flood*, the central characters experience emotional struggles that are in one way or the other reflected in their surroundings. In *The price of a chicken* and *Diamond*, the characters are caught up in the changing of old ways to new: a modern economy, and a realisation that in the modern world water is a more vital commodity for the country than diamonds. The teenagers' behaviour in *Match point* is to some extent brought about by their social circumstances in the city of Windhoek.

There is a marked difference in racial attitudes in the books published from the mid-1970s onwards as compared to the two older works. Wood is Anglo-centric in his portrayal of Germans and Afrikaners, and Brathwaite is patronising towards indigenous people. The books of the latter period are more accepting of the various races: the characters' race is usually not identified, and characters of different races interact freely without this being made an issue.

Although the books discussed above are only a part of Namibian children's and youth literature that also includes books in the indigenous languages, Afrikaans and German, they form a substantial body of literature with a distinct national character.

NOTES

- 1 Personal communication from the current publisher of the work of Erna Müller, Wordweaver Publishing House, Windhoek, 26 October 2012.
- 2 Heale (2014:37–39 has published an account of a real-life trip that he took children on to the Fish River Canyon, which presumably provided the material for the story.

DISCLAIMER

This article was researched and written before the Regulations announced by the Namibian Ministry of Education in 2011 under the Research, Science and Technology Act came into force. (See Grobler 2013.) It is the work of an independent researcher.

REFERENCES

- Beake, L. 1990. *Tjojo and the wild horses*. Pretoria: De Jager-HAUM.
- Beake, L. 1991. *Song of Be*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
- Beake, L. 1993. Of this place, of that time ... In Cilliers, I (ed), *Towards more understanding*. Cape Town: Juta: 24–27.
- Brathwaite, SR. 1964. *The river path*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Chapman, M. 1995. Making a literature: the case of Namibia. *English in Africa* 22(2):19–28.
- Davies, S. 1992. *Reading roundabout: a review of South African children's literature*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter.
- Green, L. 1952. *Lords of the Last Frontier*. Cape Town: Howard Timmins.
- Grobler, J. 2013. Namibia: red tape threatens to strangle science. *Africa in Fact* 9:37–39.
- Haarhoff, D. 1991a. *Desert December*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Haarhoff, D. 1991b. *The wild South-West: frontier myths and metaphors in literature set in Namibia, 1760–1988*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Haarhoff, D. 1994. *Legs, bones and eyes: a children's trilogy*. Windhoek: New Namibia Books.
- Haythornthwaite, FMM. 1956. *All the way to Abenab*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Heale, J. 1985. *Young Africa booklist*. Glasgow: Blackie.
- Heale, J. 1990. *Scowler's luck: an adventure*. Pretoria: De Jager-HAUM.
- Heale, J. 1996a. *From the Bushveld to Biko: the growth of South African children's literature in English from 1907 to 1992 traced through 110 notable books*. Grabouw: Bookchat.
- Heale, J. 1996b. Response to Nancy Schmidt. *Newsletter of the United States Board on Books for the Young*. Fall: 9.

- Heale, J. 2014. *Desert scones in the Fish River Canyon. Reading, eating and drinking my way around the world*. Welgemoed: Metz Press.
- Jenkins, E. 1993. *Children of the sun: selected writers and themes in South African children's literature*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Jenkins, E. 2002. *South Africa in English-language children's literature, 1814–1912*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland.
- Jenkins, E. 2006. *National character in South African English children's literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Kenmuir, D. 1988. *Song of the surf*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
- Kruger, JA. 1991. *Kinderkeur: 'n gids tot bekroonde Suid-Afrikaanse kleuter-, kinder- en jeugboeke tot 1989*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Linde, F. 1975. *The singing grass*. London: Oxford University Press. (Translation of *Die singende gras*, Tafelberg, 1973.)
- Linde, F. 1984. *Die keiserkroon*. Pretoria: Qualitas.
- Lloyd, LC (ed). 1911. *Specimens of Bushman folklore*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- MacCann, D & Maddy, YA. 2001. *Apartheid and racism in South African children's literature 1985–1995*. New York: Routledge.
- Maho, JF. 1998. *Few people, many tongues: the languages of Namibia*. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan.
- Marsh, JH. 1945. *The Skeleton Coast*. Cape Town: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Martin, H. 1957. *The sheltering desert*. London: Kimber.
- Müller, E. 1998. *Match point*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Penda, P. 1994. *Diamond*. London: Macmillan.
- Pieterse, P. 1997. *The price of a chicken*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau. (Translation of *Om 'n kierie te keer*, Human & Rousseau, 1997.)
- Republic of Namibia. 1993. *1991 Population and housing cluster. Report A Vol. II*. Windhoek: National Planning Commission: Central Statistics Office.
- Schmidt, NJ. 1985. Jenny Seed. In Kirkpatrick, DL (ed). *Twentieth century children's writers*. 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press: 682–683. Reprinted in *Newsletter of the United States Board on Books for Young People* Fall 1986:10.
- Seed, J. 1976. *The great thirst*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Seed, J. 1983. *The new fire*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
- Töttemeyer, AJ. 1997. Desert survival and wilderness adventures: juvenile literature for a young Namibian nation? In Granqvist, R & Martini, J (eds), *Preserving the landscape of imagination: children's literature in Africa*. Amsterdam: Rodopi: 119–136.
- Töttemeyer, AJ. 2012. Unpublished speech at the Awards Ceremony of the Namibian Children's Book Forum, Windhoek, 27 October.
- Töttemeyer, AJ, Alexander, S & Loubser, J. 2010. *Namibian Children's Book Forum Award for Children's and Youth Literature 1988–2003: a bibliography*. Windhoek: Namibian Children's Book Forum (distributed by Demasius Publications).

- Tötemeyer, G, Kandetu, V & Werner, W (eds). 1987. *Namibia in perspective*. Windhoek: Council of Churches in Namibia.
- Victor, K. 1994. *On the run*. Windhoek: New Namibia Books. [Not seen.]
- Wallace, M & Kinahan, J. 2010. *A history of Namibia: from the beginning to 1990*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Winter, J. 1990. *Flash flood*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Wood, E. c. 1920. *How we baffled the Germans: the exciting adventures of two boys in South-West Africa*. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons.
- Wybenga, G & Snyman, M (eds). 2005. *Van Patrys-hulle tot Hanna Hoekom: 'n gids tot die Afrikaanse kinder- en jeugboek*. Pretoria: LAPA.