

## WEEKEND REVIEW

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# Taking risks, pushing boundaries

Barbara Adair follows her fictional account of the writer Paul Bowles with a novel in which characters challenge the author, writes TAMIKO SHER

**S**HE leans back in the chair, dark glasses framing a pale face held up to the sun, smoke curling from a hand-rolled cigarette between her fingers. The café murmurs with people finishing lunch; a fountain nearby gleams against the dull grey modern finishes on the old industrial site.

Barbara Adair isn't an ordinary writer. Perhaps it's the lyrical quality of her prose, her incisive choice of voice and subject matter, or the deft skill with which she positions characters, the plot, and even the reader.

"What I find brilliant about her writing is that she's uncompromising," says Alex Dodd, editor of her latest book, *End*. "She's constantly uprooting you as a reader and breaking the illusions conjured by the text. Barbara is one of our true contemporary South African voices."

Like many writers, Adair came from another background; lawyer, professor, activist. She started writing in Lionel Abrahams's writers' workshops.

Abrahams, a brilliant man bound to a wheelchair with a debilitating disease, held weekly workshops for aspiring writers. The first time Adair read a piece at his workshop, he leaned back and closed his eyes. "You, my dear," he said, "are a writer."

When her first novel, *In Tangiers We Killed the Blue Parrot*, was published in 2004, it was short-listed for the Sunday Times Literary Awards. It is a fictionalised version of the life in Tangiers of well-known author Paul Bowles and his wife, Jane.

First novels are notoriously difficult, says Adair's publisher, Maggie Davey of Jacana Books. "We had this shout from Marlene van Niekerk, which was absolutely marvelous, so we put it right on the cover, which certainly helped sales." The novel sold "relatively well", says Davey, considering it is what is known in the industry as "highbrow" or literary fiction. Adair's new book, *End*, has just hit the bookshelves.

The transition from lawyer and professor to writer has been a slow one for Adair. She struggled to call herself a writer, even after the publication of her first book. But then, the day she was due to do her first solo flight in an aeroplane, she was in a car accident.

She was the only survivor — five people died.

"I realised everything could go, suddenly, without warning," she says. She quit her two attorney jobs and reduced her teaching at the University of Witwatersrand to part time. It was then that the book came into being.

Something also changed in her attitude. When people tell her they are too busy, she replies, "I am never busy. I don't believe in it."

It took several surgeries to reconstruct damage from the accident. Adair took to carrying multiple pairs of spectacles like fashion accessories. Sometimes, she sports a sequined black eye patch. It's rarely discussed.

Her hair is now completely white and cut spiky short, contrasting with her wardrobe of chic black. She gave up all pretence of quitting cigarettes, and took to rolling her own. Her evolving image is like a character from one of her own novels.

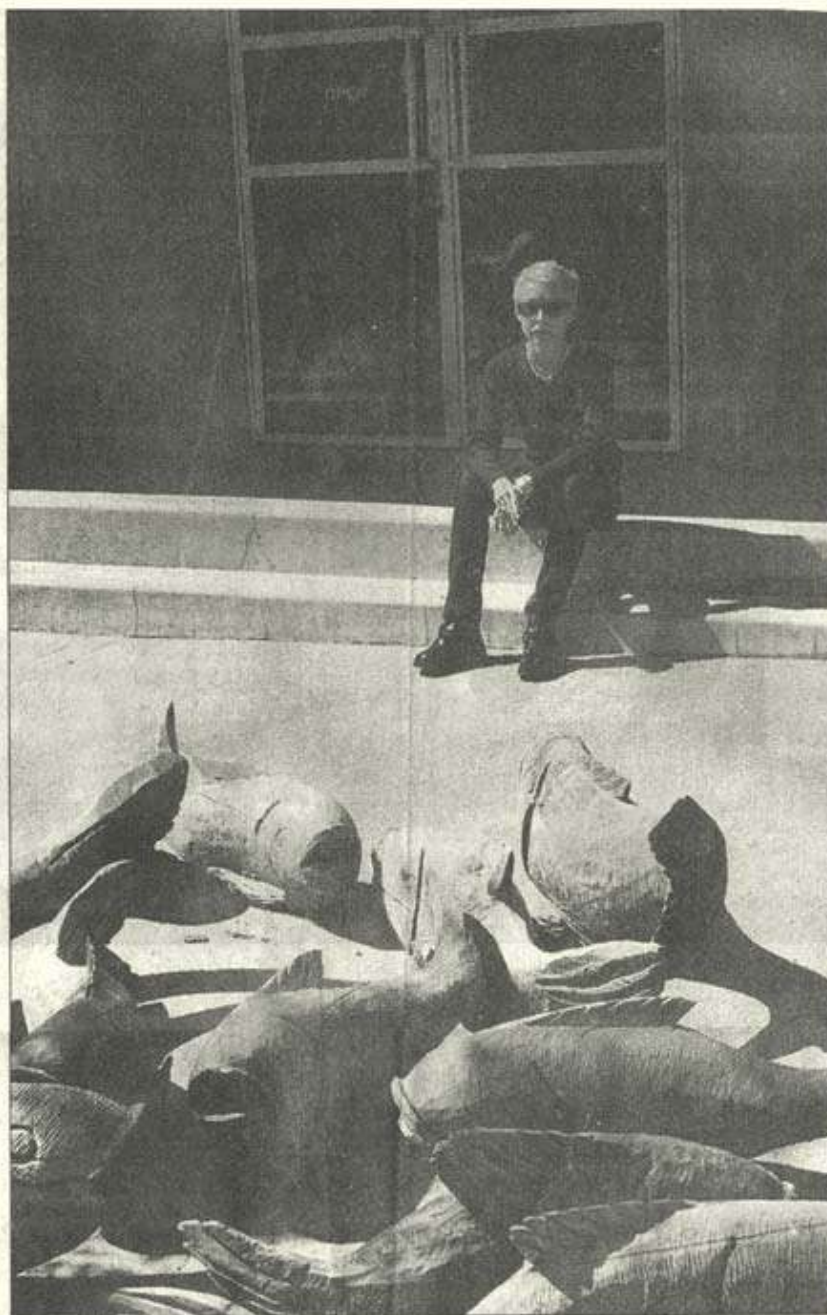
It's not easy to position Adair's writing. "In the context of South African literature, Barbara's one of our strongest writers in terms of meta-fiction," says Dodd. "She combines the real with the fantastical. She's imploding the romanticised self-importance of authorship."

Adair's writing transitions across sex, culture and nationality. She can describe a sex scene between two men, show tenderness between man and wife, fully occupy the heads of each of her characters.

**M**ETAFICTION is the process of bending realism to the whims of the storyteller. Adair's fascination with Paul Bowles stems from a chance encounter with him in a Tangiers café, and sparked the grounds for her first novel. The rest, she says, is "purely from imagination".

This ability to make the fantastical seem believable, the outlandish seem conceivable, is part of an emerging trend in literature, in and out of SA.

In Yann Martel's Booker Prize-winning novel, *Life of Pi*, we truly begin to believe that the boy is in a raft with a tiger. In JM Coetzee's *Slow Man*, "there's the character of Elizabeth Costello who comes into the main character's life", says Dodd. "The



GIVING NOTHING AWAY: Interpretation is the reader's job, says Barbara Adair. Picture: TAMIKO SHER

reader doesn't know if she is a figment of our imagination, a textual construct, or a character."

In *End*, Adair plays with the reader and her characters, as with the writer and character. As a writer, she works with her characters on an intimate level. "I spent a lot of time alone, and I prefer my characters to real people," she says.

Adair writes locked away in isolation, "all alone, where I can write, write, write", she says. Her life is cleanly divided into two locations; Johannesburg, and a house in the Limpopo bush.

Her identity in each of these places has become distinct. The Joburg house is cluttered with a collection of African artifacts from her travels. The bush house, she says, is "clean, anaesthetic, with no pictures on the walls, painted white with a red entrance hall".

"I'm fascinated by decadence," Adair says. "Debauchery is so much more interesting than, say, normality. Normality is so dull, like tea with cake."

There is something of the ascetic in her style, all-black clothing, immaculately groomed, hair spiked, sometimes with pearls around her neck.

Some describe her as androgynous and genderless, but she is more interesting than that. There is something fearless in her approach to life, the choices she's made, the way she travels to remote places, the risks she takes in her writing.

"I know I'm on borrowed time," she says, "I'm not afraid of death." It's implicit that she is more afraid of not having lived, of not writing the things that are in her head.

Adair's first novel had the odds

stacked against it. "At that time it was quite unusual to publish a book that wasn't set in SA," says Davey. "You were hoping that people would buy it on the name recognition of Paul Bowles, but there's no guarantee of that. It seems like I'm setting up the reasons on why it shouldn't have been published. We always want to push the boundaries, and that's publishing Barbara's books."

**A**DAIR says *End* is "less lyrical, deeper, more complex". As with Martel's *Self*, it challenges the role of sole narrator as an unquestioning power. The characters change gender, some go by the names of X and Y, they even question the right of the main character and author to determine their fate.

She explores the ugliness and perversity of Maputo and Johannesburg in the '80s. The plot crosses over from the Mozambican war, the apartheid struggle of SA, a story of decadence, love and depredation. There's none of the struggle writing that has become romanticised in memory. Readers will be intellectually stimulated by her text, and ponder the meaning and implication long after putting down the book.

And of the author, she is silent on most subjects. Her preference, she says, is to allow others to debate the importance or nonimportance of her book and its role in literature. She wishes to remain enigmatic, anonymous.

While it may seem a pretence, in truth she appears to be of her own making. She went alone to the Sunday Times book award ceremony, deliberately, wearing a long black coat "like Audrey Hepburn". Adair was reconstructed surgically, and in life as well.