

## The South African Writer, Sindiwe Magona

# Struggling to Survive

Helen Fallon

**B**orn in South Africa in 1943, Sindiwe Magona experienced apartheid firsthand. She recounts this experience in her two-part autobiography, *To My Children's Children* (1990) and *Forced to Grow* (1992). Written in a conversational style, Magona adopts the voice of a Xhosa grandmother passing on her story to her grandchildren.

### AGAINST THE ODDS

In *Forced to Grow*, she recounts how, deserted by her husband at the age of twenty-three and with three small children to support, she managed to create a life for herself in South Africa where the government "has been singularly consistent in its persecution of the African, attacking the very foundation of our people – the family, robbing our young of a fighting chance to life, to dreams rightfully theirs, both as members of the human race and as citizens of the twentieth century."

She had no illusions. "If I was going to make anything of my life, I would do it without any help from the government, despite the government, despite the laws it had enacted and was even then enacting with the sole object of our destruction. It helped that my husband had done me the big favour of leaving me my young. That, and the benefit of a childhood that had left me with a wondrously resilient sense of worth,

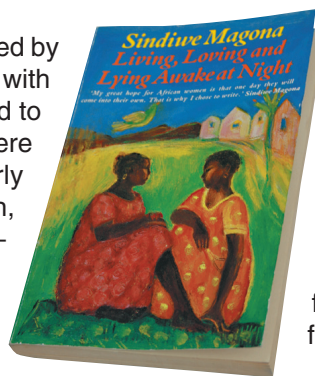
were the strongest weapons in the war of survival that I was about to wage."

Despite being a qualified teacher, Magona found herself having to take up a variety of occupations in order to survive. Her experience working as a domestic servant made her very aware of the plight of black maids working for white South African families.

### CRUEL APARTHEID

*Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (1992) is a series of short stories featuring Atini, a village mother forced to leave her five starving children in order to find work to provide for them. Atini tells her own story and listens to the stories of other maids who care for white children while their own children are far away in their home villages.

Each story is given as title the name of the maid who is speaking to Atini; each story is in that woman's own words. In the maids' stories the attitudes of their white employers towards them are revealed. At best, they are treated like children; more frequently like slaves. Apartheid reinforces this; the maids know that, if they try to confront their employers about salaries or conditions of employment, they might be sent to jail.



“You think they’ll let a kaffir maid say that the white madam is lying?” Sheila, one of the maids asks Atini. However, there are indications that life is changing. The women are very aware of the unfairness of their situation and are beginning to ask questions. Sheila asks, “Have you heard about how maids should not let the white woman call them girl or servant anymore? And we should join a group to fight for our rights? Do you think that that can happen? White women can learn not to call us girl?”

While each woman has her own voice and tells her own story, the themes are common: the desire for a decent wage on which they can live and bring up their children; the desire to be treated with respect, including keeping their own name rather than being assigned a new name their employer finds easier to pronounce.

#### WOMEN TOUCHED BY TRAGEDY

Magona’s *Mother to Mother* (1998) takes the form of a letter to the mother of Amy Biehl. An American Fulbright scholar, Biehl travelled to South Africa to work as a volunteer during South Africa’s first democratic elections. She was killed by a group of black youths the day before she was due to return home.

Magona crafts the letter to Amy’s mother as if it was written by Mandisa, the mother of one of the men that murdered Amy. In the letter Mandisa tries to explain that this is a tragedy of two lives. She writes on the irony that her son now has better shelter than he had before the murder: “Why now, when he’s an outcast, does my son have a better roof over his head than ever before in his life? I do not understand why it is that the government is giving him so much more now when it has given him nothing at all, all his life.”

Coloured with the language and customs of her people, the novel recounts events from Mandisa’s childhood to the day of the tragedy and captures the world in which women like Mandisa and her children had to grow up during the turbulent years of apartheid.



**Sindiwe Magona was born in the Transkei (a former South African homeland) in 1943 and grew up in Cape Town's black townships.**

**She began writing in her late teens. “I just love words. I love books and stories and come from an oral tradition where I always had grandmothers, uncles and other relatives stopping by and telling stories around the village in South Africa where I was born.”**

**Magona lives in New York and works at the United Nations.**

(Photo: Corrie Hansen)

Magona, a librarian with the United Nations in New York since leaving South Africa in 1984, had read of the death of Amy Biehl in US newspapers. It was not until she returned home, eight months later, that she realised one of her childhood friends was the mother of one of the killers. “For the first time, I was forced to empathise with the killer’s family. They suffer, and their suffering is tinged with shame. They wonder what did they do wrong.”

“With writing the picture becomes more and more clear,” Magona stated in an interview. “Literature helps to create an undistorted national memory. If the nation wants a better future it needs to look at history, so we don’t fall into the same traps...My great hope for South African women is that one day they will come into their own. This is why I write.” ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* is published by The Women’s Press.