**Contributor: Lindy Stiebel**

**Entry: Nkosi, Lewis (1936-2010)**

Lewis Nkosi is increasingly recognized as one of South Africa’s foremost literary critics and also as an iconoclastic writer of novels and plays. His years as an exile during the apartheid era meant, however, that his reputation within South Africa was for some time less secure than it was abroad. Born in Chesterville, a black Durban township, Nkosi came from a female-headed, working class family. He was mission schooled in Eshowe and then embarked on a career that began with a short but important journalistic stint at *Drum* magazine. To take up a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard in 1961, Nkosi left South Africa on a one way exit permit. For the rest of his life he lived variously in England, Zambia, Poland, the USA and Switzerland, following a writing and academic career.

Nkosi’s style is a distinctive one, at odds with much of the naturalist writing that characterized South African black ‘protest’ fiction of the apartheid years. Influenced by the writings of Faulkner, Kafka and Joyce, Nkosi’s style is modernist, suggestive and symbolic. His loyalty to form and to the stringent demands of a modernist perception of art is evident in his critical essays, gathered into three collections: *Home and Exile* (1965), *The Transplanted Heart: essays on South Africa* (1975), and *Tasks and Masks: themes and styles of African literature* (1981).

*Mating Birds* (1983), winner of the Macmillan/PEN prize, is the best known of his three novels. It confronts issues of freedom and desire across the colour bar in apartheid South Africa. Of his plays, “The Black Psychiatrist” which has echoes of Satre’s *No Exit*, has been translated into a number of languages and has been performed in Europe, the Caribbean and South Africa.

Nkosi died in Johannesburg in 2010 after a slow decline occasioned by a stroke. He was buried in Stellawood cemetery, Durban.

**References and Further Reading**

Stiebel, L. and Liz Gunner (eds.) (2006) *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*, Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

**List of Selected Works**

Critical Essays

*The Transplanted Heart: Essays on South Africa* (Benin City, Nigeria: Ethiope, 1975)

*Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African literature* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981)

*Home and Exile* (London: Longman, 1965)

Novels

*Mating Birds* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1983)

*Underground People* (in Dutch translation 1993; in English Cape Town: Kwela, 2002)

*Mandela’s Ego* (Cape Town: Kwela, 2002)

Plays

“The Black Psychiatrist” *Weber Studies* 13.2 (Spring-Summer 1994)