**Contributor: Craig MacKenzie**

**Entry: Ndebele, Njabulo Simakahle (1948–)**

A short-story writer, novelist and critic, Njabulo Ndebele was born in Western Native Township near Johannesburg, and moved with his family in 1954 to Charterston Location near Nigel, a small mining town south of Johannesburg. He attended high school in Swaziland, studied at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, and between 1973 and 1974 read for the MA at Cambridge. He had a long academic career that culminated in his position as vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town until his retirement. Ndebele is known principally for his collection of short stories *Fools and Other Stories* (1983) and for his important contribution to literary debate in South Africa in the 1980s.

Although his contribution has been relatively slight in volume, especially in the case of his fiction, his influence on South African literature has been significant. This is due in large measure to his work’s divergence from much of the politicized black fiction of the 1970s and 1980s. In many ways Ndebele’s writing constitutes a return to more traditional concerns with narrative complexity and literary quality.

Many of Ndebele’s most influential postulations are contained in his *Turkish Tales, and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction* (1984). Rejecting protest fiction as an impoverishment of South African writing, Ndebele calls for ‘storytelling’ in the place of ‘case-making’, and praises writers who ‘give African readers the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture’. He uses the example of the figure of the oral storyteller on the buses or trains who tells stories of a largely ‘apolitical’ nature as tacit support for his own style of ‘rediscovering the ordinary’.

*Fools and Other Stories* (1983) shows Ndebele attempting to put his theoretical postulations into fictional form. The first story of the collection, entitled ‘The Test’, sees the protagonist taking up a school-boy challenge to run home in the rain without a shirt on. ‘The Prophetess’ describes a young boy’s anxiety in its efforts to procure ‘holy water’ from the local medicine woman for his mother and to get it home safely while running the gauntlet with local street kids. In ‘The Music of the Violin’, a young boy struggles to fend off the values and lifestyle that his overbearing middle-class parents attempt to impose on him. The longer title story ‘Fools’ describes an intense and troubled relationship that develops between a disgraced school teacher and a young, idealistic activist who represents the potential for new life and a new society.

Ndebele’s other fiction includes the children’s story *Bonolo and the Peach Tree* (1991) and the novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003). His poetry is contained in *To Whom it May Concern: An Anthology of Black South African Poetry* (1973), edited by Robert Royston. His essays have appeared as *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991), re-released as *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* in 1994.

**References and further reading**

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**List of works**

*To Whom it May Concern: An Anthology of Black South African Poetry* (1973)

*Fools and Other Stories* (1983)

*Bonolo and the Peach Tree* (1991)

*South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1994)

*The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003)