

## Mandla Langa's book reading experience

Class: II B Liceo Classico (Italy)

Students age: 15/16

Level: mixed-abilities group (Lower-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate)

School year: 2017/18

Time: the whole school year

Teacher: Catia Mele

We started with

- Reading the OXFORD bookworms *Dancing with Strangers* - 4 short-stories from Africa to improve reading and listening skills
- Among the 4 short-stories, the last one, by Mandla Langa *A Gathering of Bald Men*, was the one students were mainly impressed
- Teacher bought the book on line *The Naked Song and other stories* by Africa South New Writing Ed. but we also found the short-story on this site: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/A+gathering+of+bald+men.-a018498449>
- We contacted the author on facebook asking to answer students' doubts about the story of Caleb, the protagonist. Students believed the story was too simple and naive. Surprisingly, the author answered with kindness and enthusiasm. We were all surprised and happy. How a famous writer could have ever responded to a group of anonymous students? He did it. So we were so motivated to start our work as follows.
- The class was divided in 3 groups: those willing to read and translate the real short-story, a second group willing to write an imaginary interview to the author, and the third to keep the contact with him on Facebook, writing questions and giving answers back to the class.
- We read articles and make online research on the author
- Here are some extracts of the conversation with him after my students asked him about Caleb, the protagonist:

Hi there! We are Italian students, from Cosenza southern Italy. We have just read one of your short stories " A Gathering of Bald Men" and we would like to ask you something because we enjoyed it a lot.

1- Is this story inspired by a real story or by your imagination?

2- We think the story is a moment of deep thinking, but has the story more meanings than we can get?

3- Why didn't you tell the names of the dogs at the beginning of the story?

4- Is baldness a real tragedy in your country? How is it experienced by Africans?

5- If you were Caleb, what would you do?

6- We have read something about your life and we discovered you fought against apartheid and we'd like to know if the black people's conditions are different from the past.

We wait hopefully your answer.

Take great care,IIB

Italian srudents. xoxo

Hi Alessia, thanks for the interest. As you know, most stories might be the work of imagination but could be inspired by real events. The story was written during the period of transition in South Africa. With it came changes in people's relationships with one another. Caleb represents the rise of the nouveau riche & bourgeoisie among the black community whose values were changing from solidarity to an inward, closed & acquisitive orientation. So it's a story about the neurosis of social climbing, the preoccupation with the unimportant. About the dogs...their names are kept as a punch line, to tell you more about the aspirations of the owners than the pets' own welfare. Baldness represents losing something unimportant but which people treasure. It's as prevalent here as anywhere on the planet. Africans, like me, simply shave their heads rather than sport bald heads. It's cleaner & faster to groom. If I were Caleb I would sit down & take a long look at my life to see & weigh up what's important & what's trivial. Things are different for black people. There's no state-sanctioned oppression. There's democracy. There are problems like unemployment & poverty but in the main all that is happening within a democratic context.

About me, I am finishing a book about Mandela which will be launched in October. My email is [mlanga@icon.co.za](mailto:mlanga@icon.co.za). Many thanks & ciao. Mandla

Dear Mandla Langa,

as you'd been so kind in answering my students' questions on your short story about Caleb, I'm pleased to send you an imaginary interview they created about you for the end of this school year. I'd like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to keep on working on non-European cultures along the school year thanks to the answers you wrote to Alessia on Facebook. It was such a great event!!!

Take great care

Catia and her students Vincenzo, Mario, Matteo and Martina

Dear Catia: so many thanks for letting me know about what you & your students have been doing. I read the 'interview' and laughed and then got moved because even though you might not know this, there were moments when the 'answers' were spot-on as if you had been present in the days of my youth. Your sense of imagination is perfect. Thank you all.

And thanks for thinking of a translation of Caleb's story.

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Dear Alessia,

Many thanks for your email and I am more than happy that you're engaging with the story so closely. And, as for answering you, please feel free to ask me questions anytime and I will try to answer them.

Regarding Caleb and his worries: I felt that he was worried about superficial things, like his appearance, his fear of balding. In a way it's a worry suffered by people who are insecure about themselves. Like "hunks" "beauty queens" and "models" who worry about their appearances because without them they have nothing. So the clothes, the shiny outer appearances are what matters. Have you ever seen "vain" people how helpless they feel, for instance, if they are not in a flashy car or wearing flashy clothes or, even, without make-up?

For me the most important thing is to be relevant to the moment; to be able to be of use to others; to give people the confidence that if they're in trouble I can be helpful. And then of course I

trouble I can be helpful. And then of course I think it's important for us to ensure that the youth - the young people - are given power and responsibility where they help the older generation in making sure that the future is safe. I am glad that you're reading books and material outside of your country. That helps a lot in that, sometimes, in knowing the culture of others, you end up appreciating the world - and its people more. I am glad that you're doing this because the world is getting more and more intolerant. A president in the US talks about building a wall. It is important for me that all of us fight to break down the walls that make us strangers to one another.

Many thanks

Mandla

- Since Mandla Langa said that a new book *Dare Not Linger* on Nelson Mandela was going to be published and also translated in Italian, one of the group invented an interview to Mandla Langa's new book on Nelson Mandela
- The interview was sent to the author who was both happy and touched ...and we were much more enthusiasts!
- The interview will be attached separately
- This is Mandla Langa's answer after reading the interview



Dear Alessia: so many thanks for letting me know about what you & your students have been doing. I read the 'interview' and laughed and then got moved because even though you might not know this, there were moments when the 'answers' were spot-on as if you had been present in the days of my youth. Your sense of imagination is perfect. Thank you all.



- The interview was then published on the e-Twinning project **Reader's Tube** whose main aim was to enhance students reading and creating their own way ( summary, a tv news, pre-recorded or presented live) to present the book encouraging creativity, imagination and self-motivation.  
<https://twinspace.etwinning.net/22792/pages/page/164134> )
- The translation of the short-story, finally supervised by the teacher of Italian Literature (multidisciplinary impact), was published on our school magazine , both on line and paper version, and on NOLIMITS an on line journal which gather contributions from an international net of Lyceums.
- The author was very pleased and he promised to visit after the Paris Book Festival in March

#### Sts experience reports

Alessia Guzzo: *It was an unforgettable experience in which I understood that behind the writing of a book there is really a great job and I want to thank Mandla Langa again for his willingness to talk with us. Not everyone would have done that in his position.*

Pasquale Garofalo: *Translating Mandla Langa's short story made me aware that there are different and distant cultures to be discovered in order to have a better understanding of ours.*

Giulia Ciardullo: *It was an unforgettable experience which taught me a lot of things about another culture which I ignored before*

Catia Mele  
English teacher  
Liceo Classico B. Telesio  
Cosenza Italia

## **INTERVIEW WITH MANDLA LANGA.**

**\*TV STUDIO (3 P.M.)**

**Interviewer:** Good morning! Today we are so proud to have here in our studio the well-known, the emotional and incredible novelist MandlaLanga!

**MandlaLanga:** Thanks! It's a pleasure for me too to be here.

**Interviewer:** Well, let's start with the questions! Are you ready?

**MandlaLanga:** Sure!

**Interviewer:** According to you, are you feeling changed after you moved from your homeland to the city where you actually live?

**MandlaLanga:** Yeah, it changed me a lot, because it happened when I was about 6 years old, and my parents thought this was an excuse to growing up.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I can understand, but did you speak with your parents before you moved?

**MandlaLanga:** Yeah, but I mean, y'know, there weren't a lot of possibilities that my parents accepted what I said, because according to their point of view, I was just a kid; this made me sad for a long time, unfortunately.

**Interviewer:** What do you think it's the reason you became a writer?

**MandlaLanga:** I think there isn't a real reason. Maybe I was trying to express my deepest thoughts writing short stories. Y'know, it's cool for a teenager.

**Interviewer:** When you defined your style as a writer?

**MandlaLanga:** Well, it was a slow evolution. I started writing simple short stories about my country, and then...

**Interviewer:** ...what?

**MandlaLanga:** ...well, then I continued to write short stories and books too.

**Interviewer:** When did you release your first book?

**MandlaLanga:** I had that dream since I was 13 years old, but, y'know, the first version of my first book was full of mistakes, so I understood that maybe I was too young to realize this big dream.

**Interviewer:** Your books are always situated in the mainstream scene, with all the other writers like you, without the absolute wish of money. Why this choice?

**MandlaLanga:** I think that to become famous is the wish of every writer, so this isn't a voluntary choice, but it's a normal consequence.

**Interviewer:** Why it's a normal consequence?

**MandlaLanga:** Well, I write stories of daily life with characters that have too simple behaviors, that you can find in real life: stories that not everyone can appreciate.

**Interviewer:** How do you feel when one of your books come out?

**MandlaLanga:** Well, it's hard to explain! I usually feel satisfied and scared at the same time, because I don't really know if people like the book until it's released! At the very beginning, a lot of people, friends too, said to me that I'm not really talented at writing, but I tried not to listen to them, and, y'know, I think it worked.

**Interviewer:** You lived in Sri Lanka for a long time. Can you tell me how this place can inspire writers in sad periods of their life too?

**MandlaLanga:** The "sad periods" were often the reason I wrote.

**Interviewer:** You moved from place to place a lot of times, is it right?

**MandlaLanga:** Yeah, it's right.

**Interviewer:** How did you actually cope with the various cultures of people living in the places you've been to?

**MandlaLanga:** The curious thing of travelling is people culture. It sometimes inspires me too. Travelling and writing are the principal activities that always make me feel alive, really!

**Interviewer:** Have you ever thought to leave such 'activities'?

**MandlaLanga:** Never. I've always written for myself, not only for the others, and, until it's for myself and for my soul, I will write forever.

**Interviewer:** Wow, this is amazing. I really hope that the young writers will think the same.

**MandlaLanga:** Absolutely not. If this happens, it would be sad, because every writer should have their unique point of view. I've always supported young mainstream writers, because I was one of them during my youth.

**Interviewer:** Are you actually writing something?

**MandlaLanga:** Sure. I'm writing a book inspired by Nelson Mandela's life. It will be released in October 2017.

**Interviewer:** Are you still scary now? ...before the release... ..I mean..

**MandlaLanga:** Yeah! How did you understand this? (Laughs)

**Interviewer:**Ahah!I don't know!

**MandlaLanga:**Ah!

**Interviewer:**Thank you MandlaLanga!I wish you the best for your upcoming book!

**MandlaLanga:**Thanks!I wish you the best too for your wonderful show!

**\*MandlaLanga greets, stands up and goes away.**

**Interviewer:**Thanks to you all! See 'ya soon!

**\*End Credits.**

**Made by:**

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