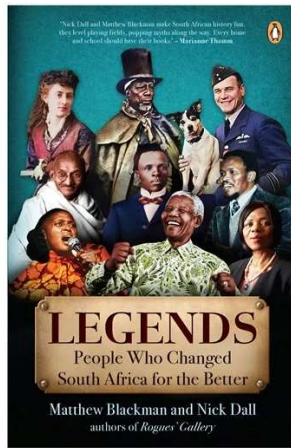
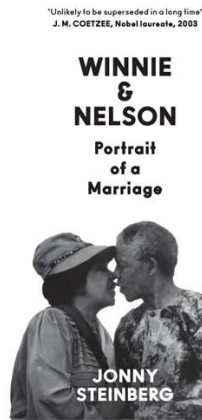
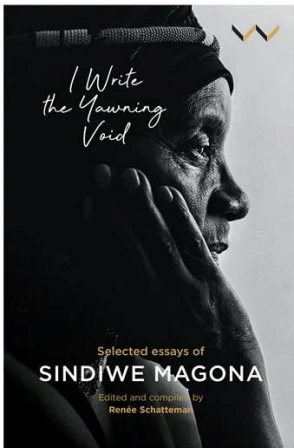


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SA authors pick their favourite reads of 2023

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Local authors' favourite reads of 2023.

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We asked local authors, who had published a book this year, to tell us what their favourite read of 2023 was – and why.

Craig Higginson, author of *The Ghost of Sam Webster* (Picador)

I am busy reading Justin Fox's new book, *Place: South African Literary Journeys* (Umuzi). It consists of a series of journeys through the South African landscape in which the writer is looking for traces of other writers and their writing in the land. The book is all about loss – the loss of people, stories, and places – and yet it is also deeply reaffirming. Justin reminds us that we live in a land in which the dead can be as present as the living. In these beautifully written and empathetic accounts, he shows how, like Walt Whitman, we carry multitudes.

Marita van der Vyver, author of *Still Breathing* (Tafelberg)

Impossible to choose between two magnificent novels, Colum McCann's *Apeirogon* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*. The first deals with the Israel-Palestine conflict – essential reading now that war is raging again in that region – and draws on the 1001 tales of *The Arabian Nights*; the second is a rollicking modern-day version of Dickens' *David Copperfield*. Both are beautifully written stories that broke my heart and lifted my spirit and swept me off my feet.

SJ Naudé, author of *Of Fathers and Fugitives* (Human & Rousseau)

In Jon Ransom's debut novel, *The Whale Tattoo*, raw and fractured prose animates the inner life of a queer working class boy from a Norfolk fishing village. In this searing account of a youth filled with loss and trauma, the fumes of beer, semen and sweat mingle with salty sea air and the smell of a dead whale. Violent, sensual, fresh and moving.

Barbara Adair, author of *In the Shadow of the Springs I Saw* (Modjaji)

Kei Miller's *Things I Have Withheld* is a book of essays, it is not fiction (and I don't often read non-fiction). These essays resonated with me – they capture issues that are unspoken and never settled. Miller does not pretend to resolve them, but rather puts forward thoughts and views that show that once these issues are raised, while they cannot be resolved, they can be approached questioningly and thus can be articulated and

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Herman Lategan, author of *Son of a Whore* (Penguin)

Lost Property, the debut novel by Megan Choritz, the actor, playwright and director, resonated with me. It's set in the 1960s and 1970s in South Africa, loaded with problems relating to class, race and gender politics. Because of Choritz's background in theatre, the characters are like real people jumping out of the pages. If you grew up in South Africa, you would feel as if you're in a familiar sitting room, listening to each person's riveting story.

Ron Irwin, author of *My Side of the Ocean* (Pan Macmillan)

My most memorable book of the year was *Decima* by Eben Venter. This is an unflinching look at the scourge of rhino poaching, profiling the execrable players who benefit from this species' destruction as well as the heroic efforts of those who protect these magnificent animals. In the end, however, it is the rhino herself who steals the show: *Decima* is a fully drawn character playing her own sad part in this tragic drama.

Annemarié van Niekerk, author of *Onder 'n Bloedrooi Hemel* (Tafelberg)

Michel Houellebecq's *Vernietig* (original French title: *Anéantir*; translated from French to Afrikaans by Johann Rossouw) is a probing novel about a man whose work as a close associate of a French minister and presidential candidate is turned upside down when he becomes seriously ill. Political responsibility and worries about mysterious terrorist attacks give way to purely personal problems. But then the protagonist rediscovers the value of love, compassion and empathy. The usually cynical and illusionless Houellebecq shows an unexpectedly mild and humane side in this exceptional novel, beautifully translated by Johann Roussouw.



Local authors' favourite reads of 2023.

Andrew Brown, author of *The Bitterness of Olives* (Karavan)

My choice for the year is Michiel Heyns' *Each Mortal Thing*. Heyns' writing is filled with such gentle insights and polished prose, it is always a delight to read. In *Each Mortal Thing*, a story ultimately of the tender strength of friendship, Heyns spices the narrative with phrases from Shakespeare to Yeats, Salinger to Camus, as his protagonist struggles to understand a world in which poetry and literature do not perhaps provide the guidance he needs. As mischievous and compassionate as the author himself, this is a beautifully delicate work.

Jarred Thompson, author of *The Institute for Creative Dying* (Picador Africa)

Letters to a Writer of Colour, a collection of essays edited by Deepa Anappara and Taymour Soomro, is my pick. From topics such as origin stories to humour and authenticity,

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Tracey Hawthorne, author of *Flipped* (Modjaji)

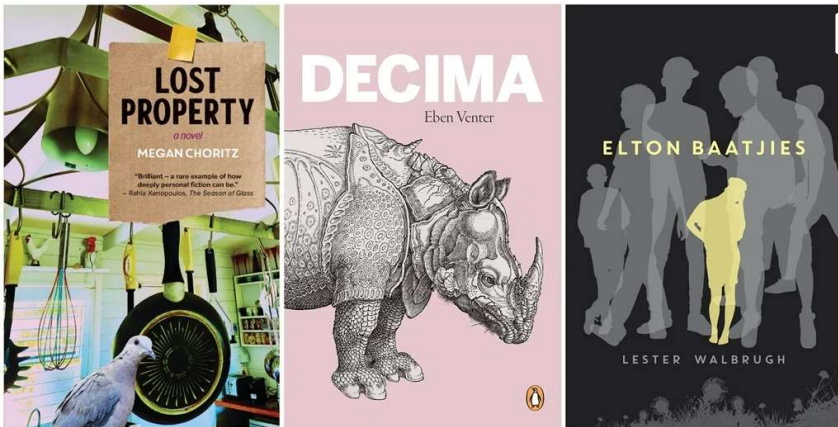
I loved Lester Walbrugh's *Elton Baatjies*. I loved how Walbrugh's apparently simple writing hid such a wealth of nuance. The intense "South Africanness" of his story was both inspiring, because of those flashes of recognition of our countrymen in their various guises, and saddening, for the same reason. And his novel spoke to me on a personal level, perhaps because it echoed some of the themes in my own book – the juxtaposition of the beauty of nature with the ugliness of human evil and urban decay, and the way people in cities regard those in small towns as being somewhat slow and clueless (and the hidden advantages of that).

Justin Fox, author of *Place: South African Literary Journeys* (Umuzi)

In *Underland*, Robert Macfarlane delivers an epic exploration of the Earth's underworlds as they exist in myth, literature, memory, and the land itself. Global in its geography and written with great lyricism, *Underland* speaks powerfully to our present moment. At once ancient and urgent, this is a book that changes the way one sees the world.

Sarah M Naidoo, author of *A Remedy for Death* (Kwela)

The Starless Sea by Erin Morgenstein is a sensory feast, with rich language and a completely unique, bewitching premise. With her second novel, Morgenstein remains fearless in her creativity and has created every aspect of this novel without concern for popular trends or common tropes. I loved this book and I hope you will too!



Local authors' favourite reads of 2023.

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Nick Mulgrew, author of *Tunnel* (Karavan)

I couldn't look much further than *Winnie & Nelson: Portrait of a Marriage* by Jonny Steinberg, arguably the first major work of post-Mandela biography. Lucid and compelling, despite its length, it doesn't give in to political myth or popular conspiracy, and instead affords us something both more appealing and more troubling.

Steve de Wit, author of *Bush Brothers* (Tafelberg)

In an insightful autobiography, *Rassie: Stories of Life and Rugby*, Rassie Erasmus reveals his proudest achievement – the transformation of South African rugby. Raised poor in a platteland town of few opportunities, he came to empathise with barefoot township talent, previously marginalised from formal rugby structures, even as he'd resented the posh boys' schools that historically produced Springboks. His transformation plan produced a generation of exciting black players, fundamentally changing SA rugby's landscape, and two World Cup victories. driven by a paradoxically strong and flawed icon – self-righteous.

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My recommended read for 2023 is *An Angel's Demise* by Sue Nyathi. The story unfolds as a sweeping saga, commencing in 1977, and delves into the tumultuous legacy and tragic fate of a family. I particularly enjoyed that the story revolves around a female protagonist's journey of self-discovery, exploring themes of identity, independence and her realisation that personal growth often requires significant upheaval.

Diane Awerbuck, author of *Inside Your Body There Are Flowers* (Karavan)

It's *Elton Baatjies* for me. Lester Walbrugh has an intimate sense of place he matches with an assured pace, and a stern, elegant poetry in his every sentence. This book is perfection, and it haunts me.

Hestelle van Staden, author of *Blood has a Voice* (Tafelberg)

In a time when it's so easy to focus on the negative in South Africa, *Legends: People Who Changed South Africa for the Better* by Matthew Blackman and Nick Dall is a reminder that there are truly exceptional people making and having made a difference. Not only are the stories truly captivating, opening one's eyes to some characters whom one has either forgotten about or (embarrassingly) never known about, but the research is excellent. The book is spellbinding, walking one through the history of South Africa in a chronological manner and covering legends from all walks of life. It doesn't have the feel of a history textbook, but rather of the story of a country and its people. An inspiring read!

Michael Boyd, author of *The Weight of Shade* (Karavan)

There have been so many great books released this year, especially from South Africa, but I have to choose Sindiwe Magona's *I Write the Yawning Void*, which was released at the time of her 80th birthday. The book launch at Love Books was fantastic: I experienced her wit, charm and wisdom. And when I got home and read the book, I could hear her voice in the words. The book feels like a piece of South African history, and the joy of it is that it is a wonderful companion to all her other works. So, it really isn't just one book, but a way into all that Dr Magona has ever written.

Gail Schimmel, author of *Little Secrets* (Picador)

One of the books that most stands out for me in 2023 is Steve Cavanagh's *Kill for Me Kill for You*. It is a thriller that is so full of twists and turns that at one point I actually exclaimed out loud; and I finished it with my heart pounding. Cavanagh usually delivers satisfying legal thrillers, and although this one is not legal it was certainly thrilling.

Dan Mafora, author of *Capture in the Court* (Tafelberg)

Brandon Taylor reinvents the campus novel in *The Late Americans*. The novel follows a group of young, mostly black, gay graduate students in Iowa, but this is not your mother's gay campus novel. Taylor eschews traumatising coming-out stories and difficult family relations and instead explores the complex lives of his morally ambiguous characters, revealing their innermost turmoils with stunning tenderness and elegant prose. The interiority of his characters is reminiscent of Toni Morrison's. By far my favourite book of the year.

Frankie Murrey, author of *Everyone Dies* (Karavan)

Farai Mudzingwa's *Avenues by Train* is an extraordinary novel that delves into the inescapable tensions and trauma rooted in colonisation. The story unfolds through the eyes of Jedza, a man haunted by the death of a friend when they were both children.

Anne Schlebusch, author of *Bloomer* (Modjaji)

There are some books you just have to have your own copy of, and Finaula Dowling's *The Man Who Loved Crocodile Tamers* is one of them. Immersive and full of "Oy wait! I need to

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Dawn Garisch, author of *What Remains* (Karavan)

The best book I read this year was *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* by David Eggers, an autobiographical novel that is truly heartbreaking, hilarious and utterly original in form and the way in which he tells the story of bringing up his younger brother after both parents die of cancer in a short space of time. A brilliant writer and extraordinary human being.

Robert Gentle, author of *The Scholarship Kids* (Tafelberg)

Elon Musk by Walter Isaacson is riveting and inspiring read. Who would have thought that the man blazing new trails in cars, space travel and artificial intelligence is a home-grown Pretoria boy from a broken home? You go, dude!

Kerry Hammerton, author of *Afterwards* (Karavan)

In *Postcolonial Love Poem*, Natalie Diaz, confronts truths about family, community and love with a descriptive and forthright language. I was particularly struck by her direct and sometimes playful confrontation of colonialism, and the longing and intimacy in her erotic poems. A collection I will return to again and again.

Busisekile Khumalo, author of *Sunshine & Shadows* (Kwela)

Things We Lost by Okwiri Oduor is equal parts innocence, cynicism, satire, fantasy, sarcasm, witticism, folklore, reality, spirituality and history, all draped in an aching longing so loud that it jumps out of the pages and coils itself tightly around you as you read until the last line. In the beginning, I struggled with the author's style of writing; kind of like with *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, it took me a day to get into her prose, but once I got the hang of it, I was enraptured. She weaves meticulously between past and present, magic and reality, spirituality and fantasy, I was fascinated and took longer to read the book than I normally would because there are passages in the book that niggled at my consciousness, demanding for me to stop and ponder.

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