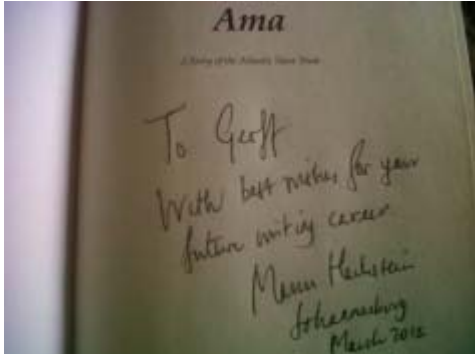


From Geosi Reads
A World of Literary Pieces



**A Day with Commonwealth Writers Prize Winning Author,
Manu Herbstein**

March 30, 2012

Date of Meeting: Sunday, 4th March, 2012

Time of Meeting: 9 a.m. (South Africa Time)

Meeting Place: Johannesburg, South Africa

So I was on my way from the Eastern Cape to Pretoria (some 15 hours journey via bus) when the message came through: '...if you'd like to say hallo before I leave...'. Now, that was in response to my earlier mail to Manu about my interest to interview him at GeosiReads. Manu was apparently scheduled to leave South Africa to Ghana by Monday but I was privileged to meet him personally a day before he left the country.

The meeting place was Johannesburg at his son's apartment. I arrived there exactly nine o'clock a.m. as scheduled (although I struggled a bit in locating the house) because when you're given such an opportunity to meet a calibre of an acclaimed writer as Manu you do not want to miss a second of the time allotted. I spent a whole day with Manu from nine o'clock a.m. up to about five p.m. when I was due to catch a bus back to the Eastern Cape.

The atmosphere was generally bright, warm and sunny when Manu met me at the gates and led me into the living room. When we settled down to business I knew I had entered a writer's palace; Manu took me through his world of writing, narrating to me details about his writing career, the books he has written to date, the travels he has embarked upon, personalities he has met and worked with, the themes he writes about, the prizes he has won in the literary world and a look into the future. By the time Manu had finished narrating to me, I was almost left with few questions to ask because he had virtually answered all the questions I had prepared for him. In the

course of listening to him, I found myself filling my notepad from page to page; my pen had a busy day indeed!

In the sphere of the people he had met or worked with, I had this question for him. ‘You met Es’kia Mphahlele in Nigeria...?’ In fact, my first acquaintance with Mphahlele was with his autobiographical book ‘Down Second Avenue’ which I had read on a flight from Accra to Johannesburg not too long ago. And it was after I had read this book that I realised that the literary giants of South Africa were not only limited to the likes of Paton, Gordimer, Coetzee ... but also of Mphahlele who was a literary giant of his own and his time. So I was curious to know what relationship Manu had with Mphahlele. It so happened that although Manu lived in Abeokuta at the time and Mphahlele in Offa, he had collaborated with Mphahlele in raising funds for the Treason Trial Defence and Aid Fund around the nineteen sixties during the apartheid era in South Africa.

Manu Herbstein was originally born Moritz Isaac Herbstein and so I was curious enough to know why he bears the name Manu. He smiled briefly to the question and told me how he has been asked many times in Ghana. Seemingly, in Ghana, Manu is a popular name which literally means second born child (given to Akan males) and so I was quickly drawn to this fact even before I posed the question to him. But according to Manu, as a child he found it hard to pronounce Moritz, preferring to say something like Manu and thus how the name originated and why he bears that name.

In fact, it was a delight hanging out with Manu, who treated me with baffling openness as if we had already met and known each other. His personality and deportment was, to me, unfathomable. He showed me his library which boasts of different kinds of books. They are books he had bought in South Africa and have had to leave behind in Kwame’s (his son) care because they are just too heavy to take to Ghana by air. According to him, he has read only a few of them.

Of his award winning book ‘Ama – A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade’ which won for him the 2002 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book, Manu spent some time talking to me about it. In talking about how the book saw the day of light, he said he once bought a used book in Cantonments, Accra and later found out that the book was not an original version but one that has been republished under a new title. According to him, he sent an email to the original author of the book who happened to be a literary agent complaining about his encounter. The agent requested the manuscript of Ama and had it published as an e-book after failing to secure a publisher.

The agent’s quest in failing to secure a mainstream publisher for the book made me ask Manu about rejections in the publishing industry; that what account for these rejections. In response, Manu talked about the quality of writing which may not be good enough from the view point of publishers as one of the major reasons for rejections.

Apart from Ama – The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Manu has written a number of books: President Michelle, or Ten Days that Shook the World, Akosua and Osman, Brave Music of a Distant Drum, Ramseyer’s Ghost and a host of articles: Jai Hind (in Chimurenga), The Car Doctors of Maamobi (in The African Cities Reader, Vol. II),

Sankofa in Rhode Island and 50 years ago: Zeke in Nigeria, Es'kia Mphahlele and the Anti – Apartheid Association of Nigeria (Chimurenga Chronicle) and a host of others. Manu's Akosua and Osman has recently made it to the finalists of the Burt Award in Ghana.

When asked about his favourite author and book, Manu came up with Yvette Christianse's *Unconfessed* and Ken Saro – Wiwa's *Sozaboy*.

Manu has in no doubt travelled widely; he has been to England, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, Scotland and India where his stay there (designing and building bridges) has been chronicled in the literary magazine *Chimurenga*. He took me through his two year stay in India and about how he landed there.

On the question of whether Manu writes longhand or not, it so appears that he prefers to sit by the screen of the computer and write. According to him, he wrote *Ama – A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* on a desktop. Here, I had to confess to him that I for one prefer to write on a paper because I become unproductive when I sit by the computer.

By mid – day, when we had digested everything that needed to be said or asked Kwame (Manu's son, an engineer living in Johannesburg and in whose house I met Manu) had already returned home. After several rounds in the central city of Johannesburg, we settled down for launch in an Ethiopian restaurant – Abyssinia – where I was introduced to a whole new world of Ethiopian dishes. While Kwame and I settled down for Mahberawi (a mixture of different kinds of Ethiopian dishes), Manu opted for Beyaynetu (an Ethiopian vegetarian dish). I was greedy enough to order for an Ethiopian drink called Honey Wine Touch (the taste of which I compared to our locally brewed Pito).

Manu was kind enough to offer me a copy of *Ama – A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* but I would not go away without letting him autograph it for me. I must confess I liked the cover design of the book – published by Picador Africa – has the picture of a young girl, dark in complexion, with adorning necklaces, long white earrings and a red head gear. No doubt in my mind that that is Ama the picture seeks to portray.

So I asked Manu whether the writer has any influence over the choice of cover designs. 'Not at all,' he says. But he adds that, because writers and publishers may have cordial relationship and as such work closely together, it is sometimes possible.

On the current literary scene in Ghana and about the activities of the Ghana Association of Writers, I asked him whether he is optimistic about the future. In response, Manu seems to be optimistic but thinks there is a long way to go to get there although he is hopeful of the new crop of leaders injected into the association.

I had a wonderful time with Manu Herstein. He is indeed a nice man to hang out with and after meeting him I found out that he is down-to-earth and ever willing to share his life as a writer.