

*BETH SHIRLEY offers  
a glimpse of the  
man who is famous  
for re-creating  
the lives of others*

**M**ARK Gevisser wrote in his collection of profiles, *Portraits of Power: Profiles in a changing South Africa*, that the reason he chose his subjects was that he "found them inspiring ... because they were available, because they were newsworthy, because they were volatile".

Gevisser is certainly newsworthy after the much-publicised release of his larger-than-life biography of President Thabo Mbeki: *The Dream Deferred*. Whether he is inspiring and volatile is up for discovery.

I wondered, as I waited for him in a quiet bookshop in Melville, Johannesburg, how he felt having the public gaze turned upon him.

Gevisser's public lecture and many media interviews since the book's launch have sparked a lot of interest in Mbeki and the current political atmosphere. But what do we know about Gevisser, a writer who will indubitably make a mark on SA's literary landscape?

He has combined the finest narrative devices, psychological insight and painstaking historical exploration in a valiant attempt to construct the life and mind of the enigmatic Mbeki. His eight-year labour of love and his subsequent public status make the writer a beguiling study.

As he walked towards me, I could sense a hint of the frenetic and over-interviewed about him. He sits down, adjusting his crisp purple shirt. As he gets up to hug a friend, I see on his phone that he has 49 new e-mails. "I'm not taking calls," he asserts. His energy suggests a parallel between our interview and the very first interview he had with Mbeki.

I had only an hour of his time. So I would have to make something of the man with "scraps, thoughts, fragments", or as Gevisser noted in his work, shards.

An intuitive high school teacher told Gevisser he had to make literature his life. But he had already done so. At age 10, armed with what he describes as "innate curiosity", Gevisser wrote his first novel, *Operation TAS* (taken at sunrise). It was a thriller set in Mauritius and was received with critical acclaim by 10 influential adults, who were each given a meticulous handwritten copy of the book.

came at a seminar conducted on Virginia Woolf.

"It opened me up to an understanding of writing, and an understanding of connecting writing to politics, and using writing to explore subconscious and conscious ideas," Gevisser says.

Woolf embodied the zeitgeist of the modern period by employing stream-of-consciousness writing, which delves into another person's interiority and creative processes. However, Woolf once declared, rather devastatingly: "We cannot know another."

Gevisser does not share Woolf's angst, but thinks the mystery of trying to reconstruct another life is compelling.

He sees himself as an archaeologist. He excavates bits and pieces of clay. From this, he can extrapolate what the whole plate might have looked like and then out of this, what might have constituted civilisation. "It is an act of imagination," he says.

"I want the reader to end this book and say, I have learnt a lot — I feel like I understand a lot about Mbeki, about SA, about life, about change, but I still don't know Mbeki. Gevisser doesn't even know Mbeki. The only person that would know Mbeki is himself, but that is if he spends years in therapy." The biography is never complete; there is always an invitation to more probing.

Gevisser has a capacity for empathy which reiterates the ability to imagine the other. Empathy, according to Milan Kundera, is the

A precedent was set, and the young man sailed to America in the 1980s to study comparative literature at Yale University.

It was in the US that he came into contact with the "greats", whom he studied in an "eccentric way". A life-changing experience

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“maximal capacity of affective imagination; the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then it is supreme.”

In Gevisser's own words, which provide much-needed clarification for his sentiments regarding Mbeki: “Empathy and sympathy are confused. Empathy is understanding. Sympathy is agreement. But once you humanise someone, then maybe it is easier to sympathise with them, even if you are fighting them on AIDS.”

Gevisser has taught journalism students that the first thing they must learn is empathy. He believes journalists are trained to be thick-skinned, whereas he sees himself as more sensitive than that: “When I meet a subject, every nerve ending in my body is alive. I experience that human being.”

The idea of home, exile and disconnection is not as important to Gevisser as it is to Mbeki. “We come home in different ways,” he says. “One home is ‘stille’, which I have described in the book, and the other definition, which is Edward Said's, is that home is a prison with borders that need to be defended. I love being at home, but I'm always making sure that home never becomes a prison.”

Mbeki's life is tragic in some respect because he never went through his own personal forgiveness. Confronting his suffering would have compromised the “super-structure of national reconciliation”.

Asked to describe his “poetic memory” — which is, in Kundera's

words, something that charms or touches us, and that makes our lives beautiful — Gevisser leans closer and stops fidgeting. It is for him moments with family and friends where there is space for being rather than doing.

His face glimmers when he speaks of his young nieces and nephews, who perpetually charm him: “They are so trusting.”

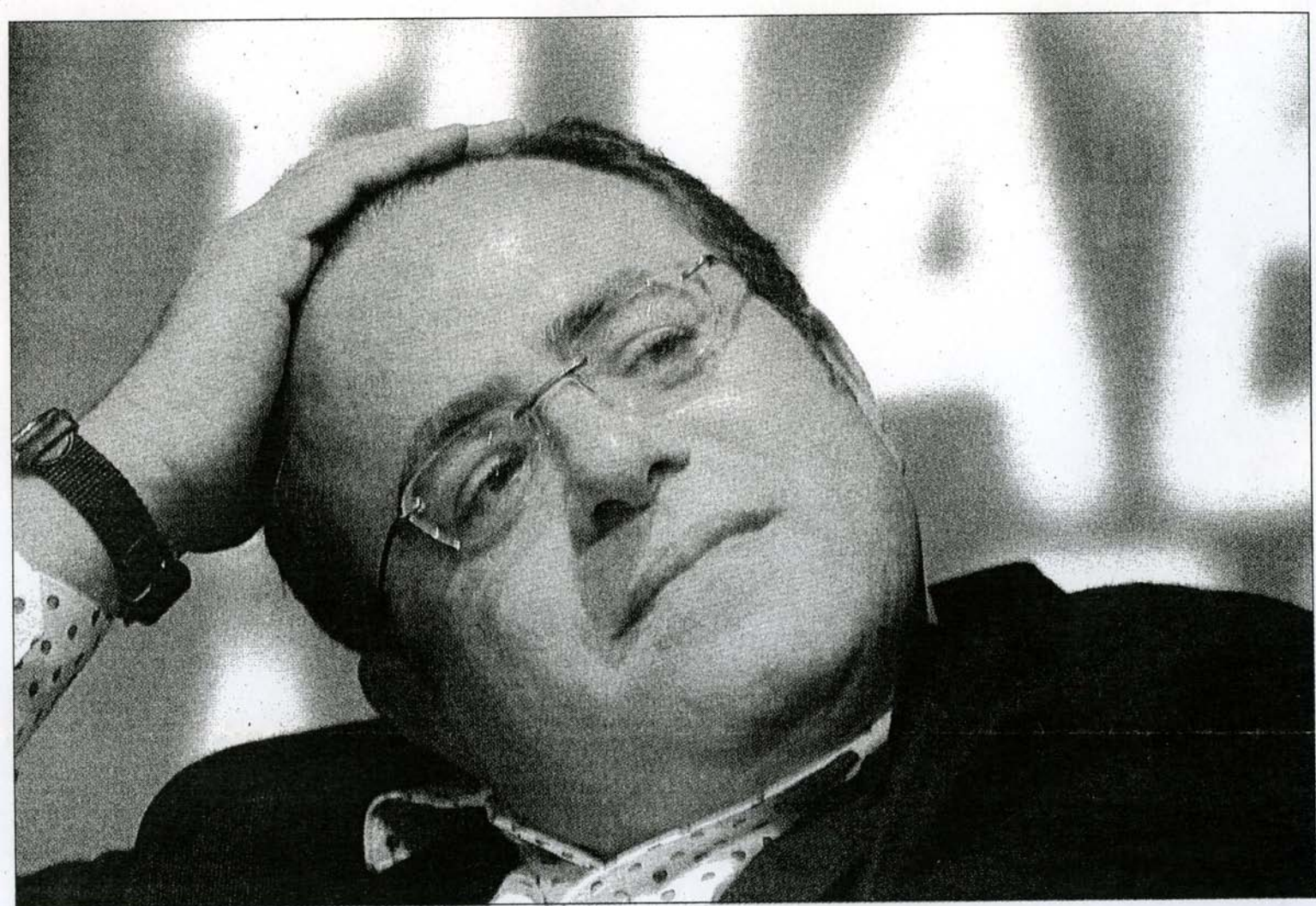
Woolf wrote: “My own brain to me is the most unaccountable of machinery — always buzzing, humming, soaring, roaring, diving.” Is it the same for Gevisser? “Life is about finding a balance between noise and calm,” he says. “I have a very frenetic, almost spastic energy. I fidget all the time. It's a joke that people put things away when I visit.”

But Gevisser has practised Iyenga yoga for some time now. “I quest to find stillness.” Writing also provides this space for him, where there is a transcendental experience in its very act.

Gevisser starts fiddling with his watch, gathers his Moleskine and motions to leave.

He walks away in a lumbering and endearing way. In the fragment of time he allowed me, there must be subtleties of character and displays of the certain raconteur that I missed.

What I can make of his gifted insights and “imaginings” into the lives of others is summed up in what he thought of Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his wife Leah: “It's hard not to love these people, even if you hardly know them.”



**LITERARY ARCHEOLOGIST:** Mark Gevisser sees biography as an act of imagination, after all the digging is done. Picture: ROBERT BOTHA