

In Memoriam Gus Ferguson, South-African Poet and Cartoonist (1940-2020)

Douglas Reid Skinner

Writer

Born in 1940 in Stornoway in the Hebrides, Gus Ferguson moved to South Africa with his family when he was nine years old. He grew up in Harrismith, Durban and Cape Town, where he graduated as a pharmacist and worked thereafter. In the late-1970s he joined the Pharmaceutical Society and became director of the society's Western Cape branch. Subsequently, he left them to work for Medicredit first, then the United South African Pharmacies (USAP). He retired in 2011.

In addition to his career as a pharmacist, Gus was a well-known and loved poet, cartoonist and publisher, renowned for his offbeat, incisive and empathetic sense of humour. His own writing and drawing soon spurred him into a parallel career as a small publisher and literary magazine editor - for which activity he won the annual SAFI-KA Against All Odds Publisher award in 2000. In 2001, he was awarded the Molteno Medal for Meritorious Contribution to Literature. In 2009, he was awarded the English Academy Gold Medal for Distinguished Services to English. Other awards include the AA Vita Award and the Eleanor Anderson Special Award.

Gus's publishing activities centred around two magazines, the whimsical *Slug Newsletter*, which became *Slugnews*, and the subsequent long-lived *Carapace*, which published a mix of poems, drawings, cartoons and short reviews, that brought out over 100 issues and in which the poems of many current South African writers first appeared. His magazine publishing soon led to book publishing under the imprint Snailpress, plus two smaller imprints, Firfield Press and Carapace Poets. He brought out dozens of slim volumes by South African poets (and one or two non-South African poets), often in combination with other small presses, such as Kwela and Crane River.

The list includes many well-known names, such as Ingrid de Kok and Tatamkhulu Africa, Fiona Zerbst and Ken Barris.

The appearance of Gus' own books of poems began in 1979 with *Snail Morning*, and went on to include *Doggerel Day* in 1982, *Carpe Diem* in 1992, *Icarus Rising* in 1994, *The Herding of the Snail* in 1995, *Light Verse at the End of the Tunnel* in 1996, *Stressed-Unstressed* in 2000, *Dubious Delights* in 2006, *Holding Pattern* in 2010, *Arse Poetica* in 2010 and *Holding Back* in 2014. Many of his collections also included cartoons and drawings in them.

Gus also published two books for children, *In the Land of the Upper-Ping* and *The Land of Pong*, as well as three books of cartoons, *Love Amongst the Middle-Aged* in 1997, *Waiting for Gateau* in 2004 and *Dubious Delights: of Aging and Other Follies* in 2006. He was a prolific doodler, often busy with his pen on the back of an envelope, in a notebook or on a scrap of paper, no matter the occasion. Everything and anything was grist to Gus's mill, with many cartoons gently aimed at writing and writers, such as this gentle ribbing of the poet Douglas Livingstone.

Having struggled with advancing illness for nearly a decade, Gus passed away on 27 December 2020. I think that Gary Cumiskey, who guest edited *Carapace* 54, spoke for all of us when said of Gus in his editorial, "I take my hat off to Gus for continuing to be an example to many of us throughout the years, and hopefully to future home publishers to come".



The scribble by Gus Ferguson is an attempt to recreate a cartoon of his published in *New Nation* ca. 1972, which sparked off a friendship (cf. *Carapace, A Memorial Issue for Douglas Livingstone*, nr. 7)

