O n Tuesday, Njabulo Ndebele, the vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, was present at Maida Khan-Mandela's first time she turned up, unexpectedly, at the launch in Johannesburg, of The Cry of Winnie Mandela, Ndebele's novel. Although she had just come out of prison, her appearance at the launch of the book made an impact. The combination of fame, nobility and strength, makes no one will be able to write about her in his or her book without acknowledging the impact she has had on literature.

Winnie, the first time I saw her so closely.

By taking on Maida Khan-Mandela, Ndebele too has shown that he is no coward. It is 20 years since the publication of Fools and Other Stories, a collection about township life under apartheid, established Ndebele firmly in the South African literary scene as a writer of great sensitivity and humanity, including his trenchant literary criticism.

In November 1984, in Rediscovery of the Ordinary, a keynote address at a conference on New Writing in Africa: Continuity and Change at the Commonwealth Institute in London, he denounced "the social focus on the heroic, the posturing in a culture that desperately needs the ordinary and the commonplace", adding "that the ordinary is the substance of thought and feeling, of class analysis and the mature acceptance of our political and social conditions and limitations". The address was published in 1984 in Rediscovery of the Ordinary, a collection of South African Literature and Culture.

So, too, in The Cry of Winnie Mandela, he has tried to write a novel about the ordinary, a novel about the girl who was the symbol of the struggle against apartheid, a novel about the ordinary, a novel about the girl who was the symbol of the struggle against apartheid, a novel about the girl who was the symbol of the struggle against apartheid.

Winnie as a symbol of the burden of waiting

Maureen Isaacs speaks to Njabulo Ndebele about his 'brave' new novel that explores the life of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

Njabulo Ndebele at the launch of his new book The Cry of Winnie Mandela, which takes a long, hard look at a woman who is regarded as a South African icon.

Ndebele's articulation of Winnie's complexity is unique and ustinating. "Winnie" says "I am not a politician, I am what people make me," Winnie was equipped with the personal qualities that perhaps the right character for the public writing she did on behalf of South African women. She is "brave"...became a political act symbolising self-sacrifice commitment to a public cause.

Winnie's journey is one of survival, of perseverance, of triumph over adversity. She is a symbol of the burden of waiting, of the struggle against oppression, of the fight for freedom.

The burden of this waiting is the theme of the novel, Cry, which Ndebele embarked upon during the 1980s, examines the phenomenon of absence, the longing and sexual desire experienced by women controlled by rules made by men. These lonely women are prey for men who use them as "sexual merchandise" but bizarrely require absolute fidelity and purity. Many women collapsed with this hypocrisy.

Ndebele used the story of Pone, who lived in the prison for 18 years before she forsook her fidelity as "a metaphorical frame within which to examine this phenomenon". There is no literal short-cut here. Ndebele claims there are no absolute contradictions between Winnie and Poneko. He says that he is playing a literary game in what he calls "four imaginary books" in order to distance himself from the task he has taken on. He borrows from Homer's The Odyssey. He adds four women who are chosen as a chorus representing both the conscience of Winnie and the audience. From Milan Kundera he borrows the idea that the women represent thought, and he uses these thoughts in a dialogue with Winnie that is both torturous and exhilarating.

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Ndebele finds, her overblown gestures amusing. Recalling her childhood in Bizanais the Eastern Cape, where she kept the company of boys and softened only when forced to baby-sit her siblings following her mother's death, she said: "I miss my childhood, I realise the effect it had on me, the love of my country running through those bare fields forever.

In the novel he takes Winnie to task for her incitement, her descent into brutality and for the way she came to believe she owned the struggle. During her confrontation with a lawyer at the trial commission hearings into the murder of Stompie Sepele by the Mandela Football Club, which she headed, she achieved "a victory of image and gesture, which had become fused into a compelling reality of their own". Ndebele does not fail to note that she refused to take responsibility for her actions.

But he manages to separate the raw analysability of Winnie Man- nelia from the gran gesture of her own political rhetoric. "She says it is dangerous if the mask and the wearer of the mask become one thing. It is self-consciousness that brings intimacy into the clash between the external and the personal." No mean force to be reckoned with, with her many gifts. Winnie is also a victim. In the desolation of Brandfort, where she served a succession of banishments between 1963 and 1975, she said: "I was powerless before my own loneliness." Ndebele says the Brandfort experi- ence was a catalyst to writing. By describing "the maddening desire of a woman wrecked by an indescribable loss without an object", Ndebele risks unknown territory. How else was he to tackle the time in Winnie's life when her affair with Dal Mfengu came to an embarrassing public end? "This exploration of Madikizela-Mandela touches all of us because we are all carrying Nelson and Winnie and their drama within us, says Ndebele. At the launch of Cry in Cape Town last week, he said that at some point the public figures who re- side within us cease to have control over their self-definition. So that public morality is the extent to which we bring all of these inter- pretations of such figures to the public domain. Ndebele stresses em- phatically the responsibility of jour- nalists, politicians, writers and artists in this regard. He provides an atmosphere in which Winnie can unburden herself, but she will also later complies with the proprieties of freedom.

He has wrestled Winnie from what he referred to in Rediscovery of the Ordinary as "the spectacular political wrestling match of the South African social formation." Then he took aim at the obvious- ness that distorted South African fic- tion. He acknowledges that in Cry he has achieved the depth that comes with exploring the interiority of character — a notion he was once forced to defend. In 1984 he was adamant that literature provides no lessons but a compelling context for in depth examination.

Ndebele's success lies in his ablility to penetrate the essence of the issues he explores.

He says several women have approached him and asked: "How do you experience this understanding? Do you experience this feeling?" He is adamant that Cry is not a feminist treatise. "I was trying to explore the limits and possibilities through female experi- ence. Feminism becomes one interpretation but it is not the only one."

It was demanded of Winnie that she resemble the famous husband who left her behind. Blessed with extraordinary charisma and beauty she became, as she describes in Cry: "a character... in my story present in the knowledge that I could never be entirely my own creation, even less yours."

With Winnie, Ndebele rages against whiteness, against "the imposed notions of order" into which the country had been socialised under "the long dream of apartheid."

Like Winnie, Ndebele rages against the "order sought by disorder" caused by the pre-dawn raids, the brutality that was internalised by so many victims. Nelson Mandela provided home for all and we still carry this home within us. But still, says Ndebele, we are displaced. "We still have to find the homes that have been shattered."

"How does somebodyrape a three-year-old? What place does such a person come from?"

• The Cry of Winnie Mandela by Njabulo Ndebele is published by New Africa Books and costs R125.