

# An eye on her homeland

Rose Moss, back in South Africa after 40 years, finds hope and real concerns, writes **KEN DANIELS**

**S**outh Africa still feels like home to author Rose Rappoport Moss even though she left her country of birth more than 40 years ago.

Moss is on a visit to Cape Town to promote her new book, a collection of short stories, published by Penguin.

Called *In Court*, the stories are taken from the author's experiences over a long period. Not surprisingly, South Africa features prominently in the collection that came about as a result of encouragement from local writer Stephen Gray.

Moss says Gray reminded her of a story she had written decades ago. She found it in an old file and it was used as the first story in her book.

It is a short but powerful account of Moss's observation of a neighbour in Yeoville in Johannesburg where she grew up. The story takes a sudden and violent twist and exposes many of the ironies and vagaries that still exist in South Africa to this day.

Moss is clearly delighted to be back in the country that moulded her youth, although her memories are not always pleasant. But she says much of the pain of the past has receded in the wake of the new beginning after the 1994 elections. She says the changes in the country are striking and much of the despair of the past has been replaced by a new sense of hope.

"One can feel the extremes of the world in South Africa but a strong sense of hope shines through the dangers that exist in a changing society," she says.

"One of the most noticeable

**IN COURT**  
Rose Moss  
(Penguin Books)



changes is the way in which South Africans now feel towards each other and how they relate to other people in the world.

"After the isolation caused by apartheid, the country is now part of the world and provides leadership to the world on many issues," she says.

Moss left South Africa soon after the 90-days' detention laws were passed in 1962 and many deaths and incidents of torture in custody were taking place.

The bombing of the Johannesburg station by John Harris also had a profound effect on her.

"I thought at the time that I knew everything about Harris and what had led him to the station bombing. I realise now that I probably knew very little about him.

"But I saw his rage and it was like my own rage," she says.

The book that followed was called *The Terrorist* but was released in South Africa under the title of *The Schoolmaster* because the government would never have allowed the word terrorist in a title.

Moss says she knew at an early age that she wanted to be a writer.

"I wrote a stage play when I was at school. It was staged and people even paid money to see it."



**CONCERN:** Rose Moss warns of the dangers of a new government adopting the tactics of the oppressive one it replaced

She even took three days off school to write and direct the play.

A large part of Moss's writing is born out of her experiences in South Africa including her childhood days. In the story *Lessons*, the pain she

felt at the hands of an abusive teacher is almost palpable.

Her writing recognised the oppression that was growing in South Africa in the 1960s and by the 1980s would move towards fascism.

After she left there would follow a litany of horrors, from the Soweto uprisings in 1976, the states of emergencies in the 1980s, with death squads, assassinations, detentions and experiments with chemical weapons.

The 1985 Delmas trial of United Democratic Front activists formed the subject matter of a book she wrote called *Shouting at the Crocodile*.

Moss came to South Africa from the US to attend the proceedings and immediately found signs of a new hope among the people on trial.

From her conversations with UDF leaders, such as Mosiuoa Lekoto and Popo Molefe, she said she had been struck by what appeared to be a new willingness to reach a peaceful and non-violent solution.

The UDF was formed in the early 1980s as an extra-parliamentary organisation operating at grass-roots level within the country.

The UDF was formed at a time when the South African government and the ANC in exile seemed at an impasse which could only descend into more destructive conflict.

"I saw that an agreement based on non-violence could be reached.

"I realised that violence was not the only way that the issues could be resolved in South Africa," Moss says.

She is convinced that the Delmas trial was a pivotal event in the country's confrontation. People, from business leaders to the US ambassador, were observing the proceedings.

"We knew that there had to be something going on," she says.

Moss believes the eventual

acquittal of the leadership of the UDF also contributed to a new sense of reconciliation and eventually paved the way for a negotiated and peaceful settlement.

Moss teaches creative writing at Harvard University in Cambridge and writes feature stories for magazines and newspapers in addition to following her career as an author.

She, like many other Americans, is concerned about events in her adopted country.

She is most concerned by the Bush administration's willingness to tamper with the constitution in order to gain short-term advantage.

"They are tearing at the heart of America," she says with concern.

"I really do hope I am wrong but it seems to me that the Republican government will get up to all sorts of tricks in order to hold on to power," she says.

Moss also has concerns for South Africa and warns of the dangers of a new government adopting the tactics of the oppressive one it replaced.

"Once again I hope I am wrong, but we need to be vigilant," she says.

Moss then quotes from a William Butler Yeats poem, *The Great Day*: "A beggar on horseback lashes a beggar on foot. Hurrah for the revolution and cannon come again. The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on."

Once again Moss says she hopes she is wrong, but she will be watching closely.

If there are any signs of new oppression on the horizon, you can be sure Moss will be writing about them.

Useful and a pleasure to page through

## SAILING

Jeremy Evans, Rod Heikell, Tim Jeffery and Andy O'Grady (Dorling Kindersley/Penguin)



This is a good book to keep in the side pocket of your weatherproofs.

As any sailor knows, knowledge often makes the difference between success or disaster.

The book tackles everything from boats through navigation and the weather to racing, but is small enough to fit in a large pocket.

This means some of the fine detail has been trimmed out – not necessarily a bad thing. If you want to browse at length on shore and get into the real nitty gritty, there is always this book's big sister, DK's *The New Complete Sailing Manual* by Steve Sleight.

*Sailing* has 10 major sections, all colour co-ordinated with clear diagrams and graphics. A range of fine photographs helps set the volume above most shorter works of the genre. The writing is crisp without being dry and the writers have managed to capture some of the drama of sailing. Famous boating quotes add a sense of nostalgia. There is also a small section on useful resources, a glossary and an index.

The sections on sailing a dinghy, sailing a yacht and techniques are excellent but the part on cruising hotspots is just a bit too sparse.

But on the whole this book is more than just very useful, it is quite simply a pleasure to page through.

– Ryan Cresswell