

On my bedside table: Chris van Wyk



CHRIS VAN WYK is a published poet and author of "about 25 to 30 books", which include short stories, a novel, two books for teenagers and now the *Freedom Fighters* series.

He's an avid writer - busy now on his autobiography - and an avid reader.

"You have to be if you want to write," he says.

Van Wyk is reading *How Can Man Die Better*, the biography of Robert Sobukwe, leader of the PAC, the organisation responsible for the anti-pass

marches. It's written by Benjamin Pogrand, journalist, one-time deputy editor of the Rand Daily Mail and a close friend of Sobukwe.

"It's stunning," says Van Wyk. "He was the most brilliant man, with an astonishing intellect. He was imprisoned on Robben Island for three years, and when it was over they wouldn't release him.

"They were afraid of his magnetism and charm as a leader. And so they introduced a special 'Sobukwe' clause into the law and kept him

imprisoned. He was only released in 1976."

He died in 1978.

Recently Van Wyk has re-read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

"I had been reading his biography and so re-read this book.

"This is the first truly African novel, with a narrative and dialogue which gives it the sense of being African. He broke new ground with this book.

"I was struck by both his African-ness and the assertiveness of the author."

Another favourite, which Van Wyk describes as "one of the best books I've ever read" is Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, which he keeps next to his bedside and often refers to.

"I'm writing my own memoirs, and it helps me. He doesn't respect any kind of tradition, he tells the story in an Irish voice as though he were talking to a friend in his lounge or a pub.

"It's sheer bravery and there's a kind of innocence as he tells all, with candour and honesty.

"I'm a black South African and I've noticed that white

people and white writers bemoan the fact that I talk about what happened in the 1950s and 1960s. It's not that I'm tied to 'apartheid stories', but it's my life. You tell your own story."

Van Wyk observes that there's a fascinating and sad approach to reading among many people today.

"When I'm in a taxi, I always whip out a book and read. It's a boring drive."

One day the driver, who'd known him for a long time, asked him: "Chris, are you

finished school?"

"I said yes, 25 years ago."

He asked whether perhaps Chris was studying at university. "I said no. And then he said: 'Chris, then you don't have to read anymore!'

"People in my community know I'm a writer, and they're proud of me, but they never to see my books."

One of his favourite books *Vatmaar* by AHM Scholtz. "I read it because I was translating it. It's the most amazing South African book it's shockingly beautiful."