

First broke the mould

Gail Smith spoke to the 2010 Ruth First Fellowship recipients Crystal Orderson and Christa Kuljian

Ruth First was ahead of her time. She wrote about the Sudan, about Libya and Muammar Gaddafi. She got kicked out of Kenya by Jomo Kenyatta. People said she was crazy," says Crystal Orderson, senior broadcast journalist and the joint recipient of this year's Ruth First fellowship.

"She was part of the elite of the Communist Party, but she wrote about the underbelly of society," says Orderson, who recently returned from Dakar, where she was the SABC correspondent in Senegal.

Orderson and Christa Kuljian, a writer and development consultant, are the joint recipients of the 2010 Ruth First Fellowship.

Established in 2004, by the Ruth First Trust in London, the Journalism School at Wits University and the African Studies Journal, the fellowship aims to support writers and researchers producing critical, progressive and independent work.

Fellows spend three months working on a 5 000-word journal article and deliver the Annual Ruth First Memorial Lecture, held around August 17, the date in 1982 on which First was murdered by a parcel bomb in Mozambique.

"I came to SA in 1984. Ruth was killed in '82, so there was still an awareness of her and the role she played. I got my political education about SA during that time," says the American-born Kuljian.

Kuljian is the former director of the C S Mott Foundation in South Africa and has written extensively on development from a grassroots perspective.

Kuljian says a line from First's obituary in Sechaba in 1982, resonated for her: "Her book on South West Africa was based more on Swapo activists than from the archives."

"I could connect to that approach to research and writing. I'm interested in narrative non-fiction," says Kuljian, who has chosen to write about the Central Methodist Church (CMC) and events that have taken place there over the last couple of years.

Orderson's lecture will focus on young women receiving social grants in Mitchell's Plain. Since April, she's conducted research with young women on social security.

Orderson admits to going into the project with preconceived ideas of her subjects.

"We think of people on social grants as being a big burden on the state. Of being lazy and living off social grants, but the reality is that 50% of our country lives beneath the poverty line. Giving someone R250 a month does not give them dignity, there is a lot of stigma attached to grants."

Another source of discomfort for Orderson was that the women she interviewed self-identified as coloured.

"For a long time I wouldn't talk about being coloured, I was black. But West Africa taught me to celebrate my hybrid identity," says Orderson.

One of the outcomes of her research, says Orderson, was an acceptance of her subjects' right to self-identify as coloured, and of her own rich heritage.

Orderson is the great-granddaughter of James Joseph Orderson, who left Barbados on Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line in

1860. He disembarked in Cape Town, married a Malay woman and established the first AME church in Salt River.

Kuljian says her interest in the Central Methodist Church (CMC) began on a trip to Kenya in 2008 where she covered the post-election ethnic uprisings.

"I came home from Kenya and 'boom' straight into the burning man and the xenophobic violence here. I was interested in the CMC and how what's going on there provides a window on our society," says Kuljian.

Not wanting to give away too much of her lecture, Kuljian says the crisis at the CMC magnifies the government's failure to fully engage with the crisis in Zimbabwe, with the dire need for proper documentation for immigrants and with the lack of inner city shelter not only for immigrants from Zimbabwe, but also those from the Democratic Republic of Congo and from other parts of southern Africa.

Both women say they experienced 'going through a dark tunnel' during their writing process. First used the phrase to describe her own emotional meltdown in detention in 1963 in her biography 117 days.

"They broke her," says Orderson, "she wanted to commit suicide during her detention."

They emerged from the dark tunnel together by supporting one another, say Orderson and Kuljian.

"Receiving the Ruth First was like a cool breeze on a hot day. It was like rain on parched earth. I had wanted to shift from more traditional development work to more narrative writing," says Kuljian.

While Orderson says she didn't realise the fellowship came with money and applied more for the prestige than for the purse.

"They could've given me R5 and I would've done it," adds Kuljian, "it's a great honour to get this fellowship."

» The 9th annual Ruth First lecture will take place on Tuesday, August 17 at the FNB Building, West Campus, Wits.