

PROFESSOR HARRY SEWLALL

Professor Harry Sewlall, the youngest of five siblings, was born on 30 December 1948 in the township of Springfield on the outskirts of Durban. He lived not far away from the home of the journalist Mr G. R. Naidoo, with whom Nelson Mandela and friends partied the day before Mandela was arrested. Prof. Sewlall, who was 14 years old at the time, pleads innocent of any charges related to Mandela's arrest!

Prof. Sewlall's parents were humble market gardeners on the Springfield flats, and it was expected of the rest of the family to help out in the field. After matriculating with an exemption at Centenary High, he proceeded to the Springfield College of Education – a four kilometre walk from his home – where he enrolled for a primary teacher's diploma over a period of two years. This was the quickest and least expensive way to enter a profession and to provide for his ailing parents. Professor Sewlall grew up in the years when the apartheid ideology of the government in power circumscribed the lives of people like him who were barred from most of the exciting occupations we now take for granted.

Prof. Sewlall began teaching at the age of twenty at a rural school about fifteen kilometres from Shakaskraal on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The principal of the school assigned him the combined Grade 1 and Grade 2 classes because he said that he was the youngest teacher on his staff of four teachers so he should teach the infants! While teaching these classes, Prof. Sewlall began further studies with Unisa, completing his BA degree with majors in English and Philosophy. On returning to Durban three years later, he was recruited to teach English at a secondary school. During this period he completed his Bachelor of Education and English Honours degrees with Unisa. He also won the coveted Merit Award for English teaching, presented by his department of education. From 1981 to 1984 he was seconded on two occasions to his *alma mater*, the Springfield College of Education, to lecture in English Literature and Methodology.

In 1984 he published the first of his four articles in *Crux: A Journal on English Teaching*. It proposed a focused curriculum in language teaching, based on his experiences as a high school teacher. In 1985 he was promoted to Head of English at Marklands Secondary in Durban. In 1989 he received his Master's degree with distinction from Unisa. His dissertation was titled "Philip Larkin: A Study of the Relationship between his Poetic Theory and Practice". Around this time, he was elected Chairman of the English Society of the Teachers' Association of South Africa (TASA). His task was to promote the professional development of teachers of English and to improve their morale. In July 1991 he was promoted to Superintendent of English for schools in the old Transvaal. This was one of the biggest ironies of his professional life because he had been an activist in the teacher union TASA which strongly opposed the high-handed

manner of school inspectors. Now that he was a school inspector himself, he immediately introduced radical changes to the way teachers of his subject were supervised. He began by giving principals and teachers advance notice of his visit to schools. This earned him the respect and loyalty of his teachers but it also brought him into conflict with some of his colleagues and superiors because not everybody approved of his revolutionary style of leadership. He voluntarily left the department of education in 1996, having served the formal education sector for 27 years.

Prof. Sewlall embarked on his second career – that of an academic – in 1998 at the Vista University Distance Education Campus. After the university mergers in 2002 – 2003, he found himself in the English Department at Unisa. In 2004 he received his PhD from North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). His thesis was titled “Joseph Conrad: Situating Identity in a Postcolonial Space”. An eclectic researcher, Prof. Sewlall has published on a wide range of subjects, including Conrad, Ngugi, Orwell, Dostoevsky, Coetzee, Kundera and Zakes Mda. He has also published in the field of Popular Culture, notably, rock ‘n’ roll and Elvis Presley. He is a regular presenter at the Popular Culture Association conferences in the USA. He has also contributed book chapters in the field of Ecofeminism, Animal Ethics and Ecocriticism.

In 2006, in his ninth year in academia, Prof. Sewlall received the L-rating from the National Research Foundation. In January 2007, he left Unisa to take up the post of Associate Professor at the University of Fort Hare. In June 2008 he resigned from Fort Hare to spend time with his wife who was terminally ill with brain cancer.

In November 2008, Prof. Sewlall was appointed Associate Professor at North-West University, Mafikeng Campus. In June of the following year he was called upon to act as Dean of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences. Desirous of returning to teaching and research, he requested to be relieved of this post at the end of September. In January 2010 he was promoted to full Professor. At the end of 2012, Prof. Sewlall, despite his considerable workload as an undergraduate lecturer, received his second NRF-rating, a C2 which is valid till the end of 2017. He is an Associate Editor of *Journal of Literary Studies*, as well as a reader for *Literator*, the *English Academy Review*, and *Conradiana: The Journal of the Joseph Conrad Society of America*.

Professor Sewlall, who lives in Parkmore, Johannesburg, has two children. His first-born, a son, is a super specialist in medicine, specializing in Critical Care, Pulmonology and Internal Medicine at the Morningside Medi-Clinic in Sandton. His daughter, who holds a master’s degree in pharmacology, is a regulatory pharmacist for the drug company, Pfizer. Prof. Sewlall’s leisure activities include swimming, the cinema, strumming his guitar, oil painting, walking the family dogs and doing general maintenance around the house. As he goes through his second childhood, he is teaching himself to ride a bicycle!