

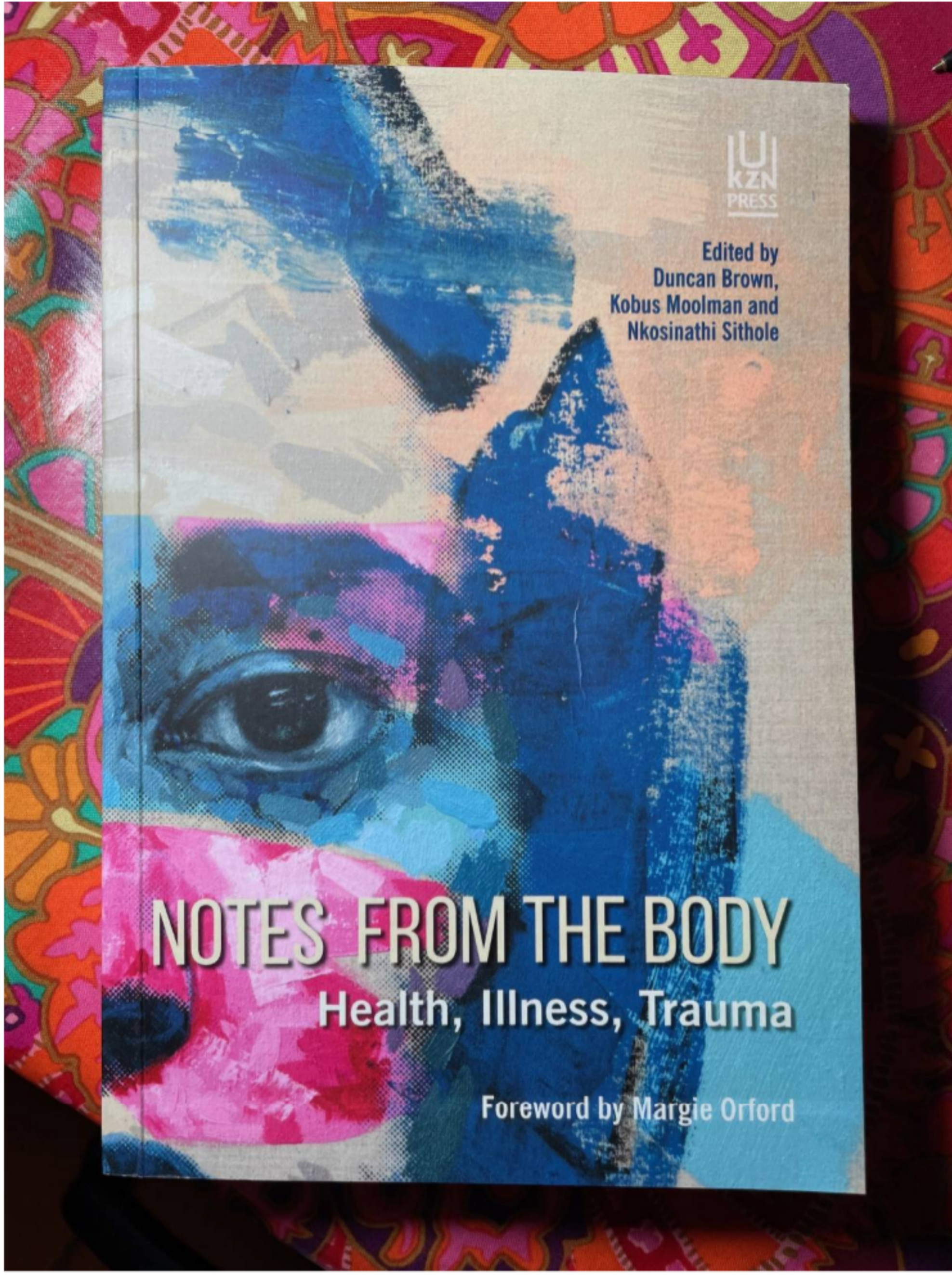
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Notes from the Body

By Derek Davey



The body is a site of struggle in South Africa. Not the struggle, as fought by activists against apartheid, although elements of this still comprise a good deal of the battles fought over and within the bodies of this country.

Notes from the Body, a collection of 23 short stories and poems, details another struggle, fought on many fronts against illness, trauma and disability, against rape, incest and Covid-19, and how the authors deal or dealt with these arduous challenges. Part of the healing lies in the authors' relating of their stories and can be used by readers as tools in their own battles.

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The book came to me via one of the authors at a time when I am undergoing a series of kidney operations and thus has particular poignancy for me.

We tend to locate ourselves in the mind and regard our bodies as obedient carriages that perform its bidding but illness reminds us how false this notion is; it humbles us profoundly and starkly reminds us of our mortality.

We are our bodies but our relationship to them is a complex mixture of our history, cultures and experience.

The struggle with any physical condition is also compounded by the attitude of our colleagues and broader society that somehow one is weak and to blame if afflicted; there is a turning away, lest they "catch" this from you. This makes the journey to health more lonely but becoming ill can also open our eyes to the illness and trauma that is always present around us, that we may have, when healthy, previously turned away from ourselves.

Notes resonated with my own recent experiences in so many ways. When my condition was first detected, I had, like most South Africans, no hospital plan and began the journey of what became several operations at Helen Joseph, a public hospital in Johannesburg.

It was as the Covid-19 pandemic began, I was not allowed visitors, and the bleak experience was not one I would care to repeat.

In the foreword, Margie Orford argues that illness, pain and trauma can dissolve the border between thought and feeling and that the role of "spirit" is essential in helping the body to recover from illness, as Nondwe Mpuma reminds us with "akulahlwa mbeleko ngkufelwa" (you do not throw away the womb because of a death) — meaning, one should never despair when faced with hardships. Without the "will" to live, or at least a positive attitude, as I discovered, it is almost impossible to heal.

Author and poet Vonina Bila is filled with this will, this fighting spirit. He relates in Staring Death in the Eye how he is shot several times, the nightmare of his trip to hospital, and how, when he finally gets there, the conditions of Elim Hospital in Makhado, Limpopo, include broken boilers, dysfunctional and obsolete equipment and an intermittent power and water supply.

"Flies, fleas, bugs and beetles of all kinds were having a feast — breeding and spreading strange bacteria and viruses."

But despite his immense pain and discomfort, he forms relationships with patients and staff and is worried about what a beautiful nurse thinks of his underwear.

"I laughed at myself without an ounce of self-pity in order to stay alive, to be liberated from pain and indignity."

There's more fighting spirit evident in Samuel Njenga's brilliant The Darkness of Covid-Death, the first story in the book.

After his beloved brother dies, he is struck down by the virus, so badly that pipes are forced into practically every orifice in his body to keep him alive. When even this fails, Njenga is put on an ECMO — extracorporeal membrane oxygenation — machine, which oxygenates the blood, as a desperate last resort.

Unable to literally lift a finger, he is at the mercy of the staff, who enable him to see his family via phone videos. The family is overcome with joy when he is able to smile in response for the first time. As he claws his way back to health, flirtations with the nurses occur and they form a guard of honour for him when he is finally well enough to leave.

Not every story in Notes concerns the body in distress. Bronwyn Law-Viljoen's Notes from an Archive of the Body in Movement is a series of observations and memories concerning physical movement and training, starting with dancing and progressing to netball, cycling and boxing. She explores the relationship between body and mind, thought and action, subject and object, object and object, time and space, thinking and doing, which change with repetition, until, for highly trained athletes, "action seems to be thought itself" — or, I surmised as a drummer, perhaps also vice versa.

Law-Viljoen's is an academic treatise, as is my favourite story in the book, Warrick Swinney's Between Substance and Shadow, concerning how musician Gary Herselman transformed into a dog on the Voëlvry concert tour in 1989. The change was so complete he not only barked and bit ankles but spent a night in a dog basket with an aggressive rottweiler.

Swinney explores multiple factors that might have led to Herselman's cynanthropy (man-dog transformation), which included him growing up in an orphanage with 19 children and his mongrel English-Afrikaans roots. The story explores other authors, such as Franz Kafka, who touch on similar topics and this is where the story, although academically written and referenced, also tilts and dips into the realm of fiction.

It is precisely this mix of art and academia that makes Notes so unique and powerful and how the authors sometimes heal themselves.

In Finding the Words in Ten Movements, Philippa Yaa de Villiers examines the twin themes of adopting her that she was adopted and the fact that she is not of the same race as the couple who adopted her.

This discovery was made in 1985 during PW Botha's state of emergency, at the height of apartheid. She relates how "skin has an accent, a vocabulary, power and presence in our country" and how "I watched my skin riding past me in a different bus".

With theatre, and then with poetry, she worked to "reclaim the identity of my life from the identity I'd been assigned", as being adopted gives you a double life and makes you, as she quotes in poet Jackie Kay's words, "part fable, part porridge".

Intertwined with this journey to her truth is the fact that Yaa de Villiers was raped multiple times as she grew up: "I was raped at 6, 11, at 13, at 17 and 19" and how she didn't even know she was violated because "where I came from, love was forced and sometimes hurt". She finds redemption: "I am healed now, but I no longer look the same" but in other stories, the pain and anger seems to still burn savagely.

Lights Out! Is a tale of incest by Gaireyah Fredericks that rages against both the father who climbs onto the tiny body of his child at night and the mother who knows but maintains her silence. There is also the Rebellious community that doesn't want to accept her grisly truth and instead projects her as a Muslim teen seeking attention. "Fok daai kak. Hoe de fok!"

Notes from the Body is not a light read, but for the majority of South Africans, life is no fairy tale, and the body is often the site where class, gender and other battles are fought. Trauma can be worked with, but as trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk reminds us, the body keeps the score, and is profoundly altered by it.

Those who digest Notes will also not be who they were before. Orford begins her foreword with: "This intimate body of work changes the reader — me and now you." She's not kidding.

Tags: Gaireyah Fredericks, Nondwe Mpuma, Notes From The Body, Samuel Njenga, Vonina Bila, Warrick Swinney, Article, Book Reviews, BOOKS, Bronwyn Law Viljoen, Friday, Margie Orford, Philippa Yaa De Villiers, Reg-Only

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