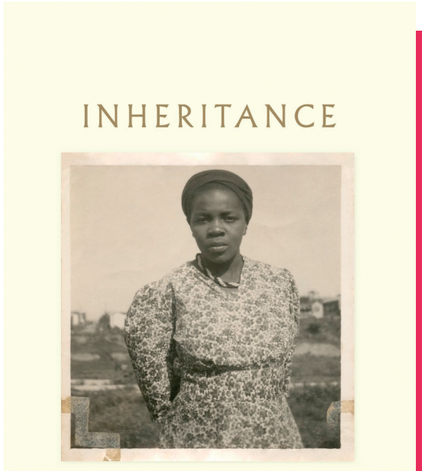
Book corner_Sep 2026/10/20 12:46

Rooted in *HERITAGE*

In this issue, we celebrate South African writing that explores identity, resilience and the connections that bind us to our past

WORDS Thembela Mbatha-Mputamputa

Heritage lives in the languages we speak, the histories we carry and the memories passed down through generations. In these pages, stories become powerful reminders of who we are, where we come from and the legacy we choose to preserve.



Inheritance by Athambile Masola

Inheritance offers a profound and evocative collection of poetry that explores the intersection of the personal and the political. Rooted in the daily lives of Black women in modern South Africa, Masola navigates the complex terrain of affection, ancestry and the linguistic ties that define us.

Having first appeared in isiXhosa, this lauded debut established Masola as a vital new literary voice.

In this edition, she undertakes the delicate task of translating her own verses into English, presenting both languages in parallel. This bilingual arrangement is less a technical feat than a generous invitation, allowing isiXhosa readers to savour the original cadence and resonance while offering English readers a window into a narrative that remains steadfastly grounded in its culture. *Inheritance*'s format serves as a compelling tribute to the endurance of indigenous expression.

Masola writes with remarkable clarity and restraint. Instead of relying on elaborate language, every line carries quiet emotional weight. Her poems move effortlessly between everyday life, loss and the larger histories that shape people's lives. Her reflections on freedom are especially powerful, asking what true liberation means for Black women who still face systemic barriers in post-apartheid South Africa. The greatest strength of this collection is its honesty. The author focuses on connection rather than impressing the reader, making these poems both accessible and deeply moving. Reading the poems in both languages encourages you to slow down and appreciate the heart of the original work. With each reading, the seemingly simple verses reveal new layers of meaning.

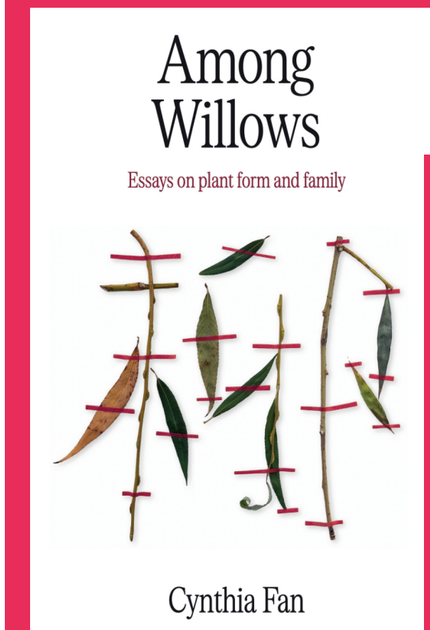
Inheritance ultimately contemplates the legacies we bear; the ancestral stories, the mother tongues and the enduring bonds that offer us strength as we look toward the future. For those interested in the nuances of South African identity or the power of contemporary verse, this collection provides a captivating and meditative journey.

Among Willows: Essays on Plant Form and Family by Cynthia Fan

Among Willows is a thoughtful and beautifully observed collection of essays that invites readers to see the world with fresh eyes. Blending science, memoir and philosophy, Fan reveals that plants are far more than a backdrop to our lives – they are teachers, companions and quiet witnesses to our own stories.

From the opening pages, Fan's lifelong fascination with plants is evident. Her curiosity is infectious as she explores questions that seem simple at first – What is a leaf? How do plants communicate? – before gently uncovering their surprising complexity. Rather than offering straightforward scientific explanations, she weaves together personal memories, botanical knowledge and cultural reflections, creating essays that feel both intimate and intellectually rewarding.

Drawing on experiences from South Africa, where she was born; China, of her family's heritage and the United Kingdom, where she now lives, Fan examines how people and plants are shaped by place, migration and belonging. These reflections lend the book a quiet emotional depth, reminding us that our relationship with nature is often intertwined with our understanding of home, identity and family. Fan has a gift for revealing the extraordinary in the everyday. She encourages readers to look more closely at the trees lining our streets, the leaves in our gardens and the wild plants growing through cracks in the pavement. In doing so, she transforms the ordinary into something extraordinary.

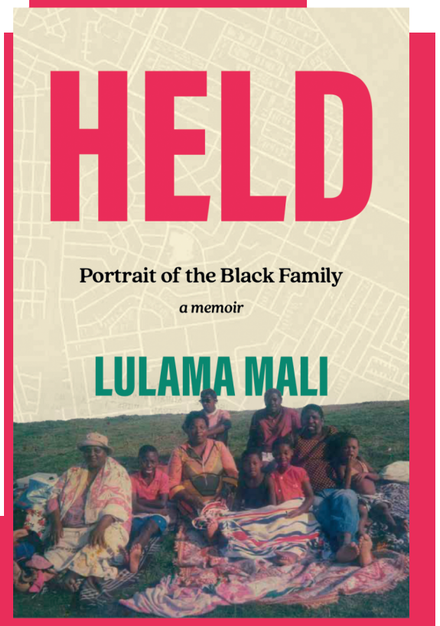


Complemented by the author's own photographs and sculptural botanical arrangements, *Among Willows* is as visually engaging as it is thought-provoking. By the final page, you'll likely find yourself looking at the trees in your neighbourhood, the flowers in your garden or even the weeds between the paving with renewed appreciation. For those who enjoy reflective nature writing, memoir or popular science, *Among Willows* offers a quietly captivating exploration of the connections between plants, people and the places we call home.

Held by Lulama Mali

What if everything you believed about your family turned out to be untrue? In her book, Mali shares the deeply personal story of uncovering a family secret that changes the way she understands herself, her loved ones and the legacy of South Africa's past. With honesty and compassion, she reflects on love, loss and the silences that shape many families across generations.

Spanning three generations, *Held* traces a journey from the lost community of Wittebome, Cape Town, Western Cape, through the forced removals of apartheid, to the vibrant yet complex streets of Gugulethu. Against this backdrop of change and uncertainty, Mali reflects on a childhood shaped by her grandparents, where family traditions, community consciousness and unwavering love created a sense of belonging and stability.



At the heart of *Held* is a life-changing discovery that transforms the author's understanding of her own story. The person she believed was her sister was, in fact, her biological mother, Nokhephu, a truth hidden by a carefully kept family secret. Rather than focusing only on the shock of this revelation, Mali thoughtfully explores why it was kept hidden, inviting readers to reflect on the difficult choices families sometimes make to protect those they love, even at great personal cost.

A primary virtue of this work is its measured emotional clarity. Mali avoids the sensational, choosing instead to extend empathy to every figure in her history, recognising the arduous decisions necessitated by systemic oppression and inherited hardship. Her observations on legacy and recollection are especially moving, revealing how the past subtly moulds our current existence.

Elegant and introspective, *Held* serves as a poignant reminder that the stories of our kin are seldom linear. They are composed of the legacies we receive, the realities we unearth, and a devotion that persists through both. This meditation on roots and fortitude offers a captivating experience for those drawn to the nuances of identity and the broader South African narrative.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY IMAGES