Preface

This study is concerned with a certain tradition or sub-genre of South African short story – what I have termed the ‘oral-style story.’ The introduction explores the defining characteristics of this kind of story in some detail; suffice it to say here that the oral-style story evinces in its narrative structure and general ambience an affinity with oral narrative modes. Some of the other terms which are used to describe this kind of story are fireside tale, tall tale, yarn, skaz narrative, and frame narrative. As can be gauged by the range of this terminology, the kind of story with which this study is concerned can take many forms: it can be merely a short anecdote recounted by an internal narrator and reported by a frame narrator; it can also be a lengthy and complex story-form employing many narrators; even more advanced varieties can include layers of irony and ironic interplay between the various narrators in the story.

The oral-style story constitutes a small part of the very extensive body of South African short stories, but it is significant: the nineteenth century was in fact dominated by this kind of story. It has received very little attention, however, and this alone warrants the present study.

This investigation is primarily concerned with the period from the 1860s to the 1950s, and explores the development of the oral-style story from A.W. Drayson’s fireside tales in 1862 to Bosman’s bushveld stories of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. As will be pointed out, the oral-style story constitutes a small part of the very extensive body of South African short stories, but it is significant: the nineteenth century was in fact dominated by this kind of story. It has received very little attention, however, and this alone warrants the present study.

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1 Throughout this study the term ‘internal narrator’ will be used to describe a narrator who tells a story within an ‘outer’ narrative frame. This outer narrative frame is usually established by a frame narrator who ‘reports’ the internal narrator’s tale. Other terms which are occasionally used here to describe the internal narrator are ‘intradegetic narrator,’ ‘fictional narrator,’ or ‘storyteller figure.’ In the sense in which it is used here, the internal narrator is not to be confused with a narrator whose internal monologue (or ‘interior’ style of narration) is employed by an author. This latter style of narration is not of concern to this study.
story in South Africa – indeed, the short story as a genre – goes back a lot further than is generally acknowledged. Examples of this style of story appeared in Cape periodicals as early as 1848. The first collection of such stories to appear in print, however, was A.W. Drayson’s *Tales at the Outspan* (1862); this collection of fireside tales is therefore used here as a point of departure. Stories by Frederick Boyle and Joseph Forsyth Ingram are also looked at briefly before the more recognized short-story writers of the late nineteenth century are examined.

The first of these is William Charles Scully, many of whose stories reflect his interest in, and his attempts to capture, aspects of Nguni oral culture. Stories from his three collections, *Kafir Stories* (1895), *The White Hecatomb* (1897) and *By Veldt and Kopje* (1907), will be looked at and one story in particular discussed in detail. Sir Percy FitzPatrick’s collection of stories, *The Outspan* (1897), also receives attention here, as the title-story employs a fictional narrator and evokes the fireside ambience of the oral tale.

Ernest Glanville’s *Tales from the Veld* (1897) is the first example in South African literature of a sequence of stories employing a fictional narrator – the memorable old yarnster “Uncle Abe Pike.” It will be argued that, despite the weight of influence from the American yarn tradition (which manifests itself chiefly in the style and humour employed by Glanville), this writer nonetheless plays a significant role in the development of the South African oral-style story.

Perceval Gibbon raised the fireside-tale genre to new heights in his collection of stories *The Vrouw Grobelaar’s Leading Cases* (1905). In comparison with Scully and FitzPatrick, Gibbon demonstrates a far greater skill with literary artifice and the art of storytelling, and this technical skill is accompanied by a more complex social vision. Gibbon also uses his storyteller figure – the redoubtable Vrouw Grobelaar – in a sustained manner, and this suggests that he had found a successful formula that he could use repeatedly. In this, Gibbon anticipates Bosman’s *Mafeking Road* (first published in 1947), the latter representing the peak in the popularity of the story cast in the oral style and therefore forming the centrepiece of this study.

Stories by Francis Carey Slater, Pauline Smith, and Aegidius Jean Bignaunt will also be examined as precursors to Bosman. Each of these
writers anticipates Bosman in different ways and they all thus possess significance for this study.

The last chapter, dealing with the period from the 1950s to the present, briefly explores the use of various aspects of oral culture in short stories by black writers. Writers examined include R.R.R. Dhlomo, A.C. Jordan, Bessie Head, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, and Njabulo Ndebele.

No full-length general work on the South African short story has yet been published, and it is perhaps the sheer volume and diversity of South African short stories that has discouraged such a project. The heterogeneity of this corpus of work threatens to reduce a survey study to superficial and symptomatic readings of works, where discontinuities prevail over the tracing of connections and trends. As the outline above indicates, this study has therefore concerned itself with a certain style of story – that which reveals in its narrative structure and content some relation to oral narrative modes.

Clearly, the criteria of selection applied mean that at least two-thirds of South African short stories fall outside the purview of this book. No attempt will be made, in other words, to cover a representative range of South African short-story writers. There will be scant mention of Paton, Gordimer, Mphahlele, Wilhelm, Roberts, Jacobson, Hope, Essop – to name but a few. The discussion will be confined to those writers who style themselves “storytellers,” who claim (implicitly or overtly) some relationship or affinity with oral storytelling.

My grateful thanks are due to Malvern van Wyk Smith for his expert advice and guidance and to Stephen Gray for inspiring me with his work on Bosman and South African literary historiography. To my wife, Sue, and children, Daniel, Matthew and Jessica, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for enduring my absence in the years it took to complete this study.

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