

A TRUE ADVOCATE FOR CHANGE

It's not easy to define Ashling McCarthy's life, career and passion in a few words. Anthropologist, professional painter, non-profit founder, and now fiction writer. We popped into her cosy workspace at Studio3 in Durban to learn more about her.

Blue-eyed, tall, with a curly bob, Ashling is gentle in nature but firm in her beliefs. Her career in anthropology has allowed her to seek greater purpose as a working artist and a traveller. She is someone who is very bound to the territory in which she is working - experiencing the place, analysing its history and creating a dialogue with the people who are living within it. She is able to feel a place, finding the issues that affect it, and make it her mission to effect positive change.

'Some people know from an early age what they want to do with their lives. I could never seem to settle on one thing, so I didn't! The thread that connects all of these interests, anthropology, creative writing, social change agent, is people and places, and the importance of intentionally getting to know those different from ourselves.'

Born (after her twin sister) in Empangeni to Irish parents, Ashling certainly lives up to her name which means a dream or vision. Reflecting on her childhood, she says school was not a happy place. She didn't feel the system worked for her.

'As a highly organised dreamer and creative individual, no real guidance was given to me as to what I could become. I left school feeling stupid. I spent a year in London, came home and enrolled in a three-year graphic design course, but in my second year I knew it wasn't what I wanted to do. 'But, I completed the course before heading back to London where I spent a year transcribing doctor's notes until, one rainy day, I asked myself if this was how my life was going to be.'

Ashling returned to SA and spotted an application for a craft development learnership to work with women in rural communities and that, she says, changed everything.

'The learnership required us to apply our design knowledge to craft development. We lived and worked with the families, to create beautiful products. This led to an awakening that helped me identify what it was I wanted to pursue in life.'

Ashling enrolled at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and completed her Masters in Anthropology, which focused on HIV Aids and Orphan Care.

'Each waypoint on my journey has been a stepping stone. While they might appear to be unconnected, the next step only occurred because of the one



before it, and each continues to influence my work. Anthropology laid the foundation for my work in the field of social development. I learnt that there is beauty in diversity and that everyone has something to contribute - regardless of class, race, religion and education level. Everyone should be given the chance to participate in solving problems that directly affect them.'

'In 2010 I founded I Learn to Live - Ngifundela Ukuphila, an education and social capital development NPO that provides education opportunities to school children and youth in rural Zululand. Our aim is to help them create a meaningful life by contributing towards their community and society at large.

'I play a management role, working with a small team to deliver programmes and services on site, as well as to local primary schools.'

Working in such diverse environments led to writing rich notes documenting her experiences and interactions. Ashling recently published her first novel, *Down At Jika Jika Tavern*, a book that took her eight years to finish.

'They say that you don't find the story; the story finds you, and I clearly remember when the story of *Down at Jika Jika Tavern* found me. I toyed with the idea of writing a novel in 2012 after deregistering from my PhD. I had the main character but was fumbling with the plot. I had a notebook full of possible scenes, but no storyline to pull it all together.

It was only in 2014 that the story transitioned from a set of stand-alone chapters to a book with a working plot, thanks to a series of events, the first of which took place on a game farm in Zululand, on New Year's Eve 2013.'

The book tells the story of a student anthropologist who returns home to Zululand and is faced with the unimaginable: her father, a game ranger, is arrested for rhino poaching; a crime she knows he'd never commit.

'The story explores cross-cultural differences, issues of faith and poverty, against the backdrop of rhino poaching. We can never truly understand why people act that way they do, unless we understand what motivates them. My line of work has taught me that socio-economic issues deeply affect people and their actions. I hope my writing can open up a new way of thinking and understanding of situations that are very far from our own experiences. As a committed Christian, my faith is vital to me, but it's important to me to understand other faiths and perspectives.'

When it comes to her skills as a fine artist, Ashling believes painting is a way to encourage conversation and collaboration, to improve the lives of people, especially if it can be done through social upliftment projects.

'Art is something I've explored more recently. My 30s was a tough decade, and I wanted to end it on a different note. I needed to regain a sense of joy, and deal with my perfectionist nature, and I thought art might do that. I enlisted the help of local artist Dee Donaldson, attending weekly classes at Studio3, and found that I loved painting and the sense of community that came with it.

Much of Ashling's art is inspired by what she sees in the projects she's involved with. The narrative behind each painting often speaks for itself. Many of the people she's painted are people she's built relationships with during the years she has run I Learn to Live.

Ashling is currently running author-drop in sessions via Zoom for book clubs who are reading *Down at Jika Jika Tavern*. Her new website (ashlingmccarthy.co.za) also is up and running and art lovers can buy artwork or prints directly from there.

'I've no idea what the future holds, but I'm a workaholic so nothing will stop me. There's a second book in the pipeline, so I'm working on that and painting as much as I can. My biggest hope for the future is that I can continue to effect positive change within I Learn to Live and the other community projects I am invested in. When stories go untold, important moments are lost, but when we face the realities of our internal lives and let our faith mould us into a person who is free to be honest, courageous and loving, real change is possible.'

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