

# Westridge poet launches autobiography

By [Kaylynn Palm](#) October 12, 2016



*Westridge resident Athol Williams at the launch of his book.*

It was a week of great achievements for Westridge poet and social philosopher Athol Williams who launched his autobiography titled *Pushing Boulders* and won the prestigious Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award for the second time.

The book was launched at the Goodwood Sports Club on Thursday October 6 and in Johannesburg on Friday October 7. The book is now available in bookstores across the country.

Mr Williams said *Pushing Boulders* tells the story of the first 45 years of his life. "It tells how I went from apartheid education to become one of the only people worldwide to undertake Master's degree study at five of the world's top universities – Oxford, Harvard, MIT, LSE and London Business School," he said.

Mr Williams is currently studying political philosophy at Oxford University.

He said the book is a continuation of his efforts to enable and inspire others to thrive. Mr Williams added that he felt the need to celebrate our South African success more, and wanted to offer his experiences as possible encouragement and inspiration to others.

“I have failed often and made many mistakes – I reveal these in the book because these are part of the successful life. At a time when we have an education crisis in the country, I think it is important to highlight the power of education to transform one’s life – this has been my experience.”

Mr Williams conducted the research and wrote the book himself. He said he got input on his family history and early years from his mother. He also got input from professional writers, editors and proofreaders in preparing and refining the manuscript.

He told the Plainsman that he had four aims when writing the book.

“As an autobiography, my primary aim is to tell my story of social, economic and political struggle to fulfil my dreams of a world-class education and to live a fulfilling and meaningful life.

“Secondly, by describing some of my experiences of overcoming boulders that stood in the way of my dreams, I am hoping to show readers the possibilities open to us all if we have the self-belief and resilience to pursue our dreams. Thirdly, our country’s history is one of erasing memory and erasing lives, so this book stands as an act of resistance against the erasing of memory because I would have captured my story, that of my family and the many others who I interact with in the book,” he said.

Mr Williams said the fourth reason is to fundraise for Read to Rise – a non-profit organisation committed to promoting youth literacy in schools in under-resourced communities.

Mr Williams is the chairperson of the organisation.

All proceeds will be donated to purchase books for children in under-resourced communities.

When asked about the timing of writing and publishing his autobiography, Mr Williams said: “I felt that I had enough of a story to tell. Most people wait till they are nearing the end of their careers or the end of their lives to share their story but I didn’t want to wait that long. I felt that my message was needed now,” he said.

Mr Williams said he started working and structuring the book four years ago and it took two years for him to write it. He said he relied on his diaries and letters which he referenced frequently.

“My first diary starts in 1985 when I was 15 years old – this was the year of the start of the political unrest and school boycotts. The manuscript was rewritten more than 10 times as I tried to communicate the essence of the story in a way that would be interesting as well as meaningful for readers. My first draft was 120 000 words and I needed to get it down to 80 000 words so edited out 40 000 words which was an enormous task without compromising the story,” he said.

Mr Williams said the book is easy and fun to read. He hopes that readers derive some useful pointers in pushing their own boulders – whether they are boulders that they are born into, boulders that fall onto their life’s path or boulders that they choose to push.

“Life is not about the boulder, life is about the dreams that lie on the other side of the boulder – this is why we need to push them aside. I hope readers are inspired to explore the possibilities in their lives, that they will be inspired to push their boulders and pursue lives of meaning,” he said.

Mr Williams won the 2016 Sol Plaatje European Union (EU) Poetry Award on Sunday October 9 for the second time, for his poem Visit at Tea Time – making him the only person to win it twice.

Mr Williams has won the Parallel Universe Poetry Competition at Oxford University and published three poetry collections including Bumper Cars. He is the author of the Oaky series of inspirational children’s books.

Speaking about his award, Mr Williams said: “I believe that if we want to feel the heartbeat of a society, we have to listen to its poets. Awards such as the Sol Plaatje EU Poetry Award which rewards both poetic craft and social commentary, serve to amplify the voices of poets and thus amplifies the heartbeat of our society – this is desperately needed in our society today.

“I am honoured to receive this award two years in a row and am grateful that the hope in my poetry for a more fair and equal society can be heard on such a prestigious platform.”

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