Race relations a mess, editor tells festival panel

JAN CRONJE

SOUTH Africa was having a “bloody awful year” for race relations, City Press editor Ferial Haffajee declared during a panel debate on the first day of the Franschhoek Literary Festival.

“No week (goes by) that we aren’t engaged in a massive race war,” she said, citing the examples of Penny Sparrow, Mabel Jansen, Ntokozo Qwabe and Matthew Theunissen.

Haffajee, the author of What If There Were No Whites in South Africa?, was discussing race and identity with UCT philosopher Jacques Rousseau, and cultural critic and Stellenbosch lecturer Wamwui Mbao.

Justice Malala, who was set to take part in the debate, pulled out for personal reasons.

The trio’s much anticipated talk was one of the first to sell out for the annual three-day festival, which brought thousands to the usually sleepy village an hour outside Cape Town.

In all, 190 writers are holding 130 events, mostly panel-style discussions, at a variety of locations within walking distance of one another.

The visitors filled up the historic town’s cafes and restaurants as festival-goers sipped local wines and cappuccinos in the autumn sun.

Haffajee, who moderated the debate, said she feared South Africans were retreating into racial laagers, meaning there was less mixing and honest debate.

While touring the country to promote her book, she said she had come across a “deep ingrained sense of rage” in black and white communities.

But Haffajee said it was high time the questions about race being raised, particularly by protesting university students, were aired.

“We have to have these painful discussions.

“I think the students have been fantastic.

“It is millennials who are going to fight these battles of race and identity.”

She remained upbeat that South Africa could solve its racial conundrums.

“We are a coherent country. Too often we do not give enough thanks that we didn’t become a Syria, a Central African Republic, or even Russia.”

In touring the country to promote her book, she said she had also often heard people make arguments based on faulty information.

One was that 87 percent of the land is owned by whites, an apartheid-era figure long out of date.

Another was that company boards were transformed, even though they were still majority white.

“A handful of (black members) are not enough,” she said, adding that they needed to reflect demographics.

Mbao, speaking of his experiences as a Stellenbosch University lecturer, said there had been a “change in the energy” since students, including the Open Stellenbosch initiative, started questioning the university’s demographics. “Before, people kept their heads down.”

In a similar vein to Haffajee, Mbao said the country was dealing with issues, such as racism, skewed demographics and syllabuses, that “should have been dealt with 20 years ago”.

Mbao denied students were being “mollycoddled” or were taking offence at the drop of a hat when they aired their grievances.

Rather, they were raising pertinent problems with syllabuses, for example.

“What I often encounter is students saying (Stellenbosch University’s) curriculum is too centred around European experiences.”

Rousseau said while accusations that today’s students were overly sensitive were false, the danger still existed that “those who shout the loudest” get all the attention.

The festival continues until tomorrow.

jan.cronje@inl.co.za