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Tribute

Reading can be disturbing: a tribute to André Brink



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Following his death a high number of tributes to André Brink had been published. A common denominator that ran through these tributes was the mention time and again of the life-changing effect his work had on people's lives.

The remark that such-and-such book had changed one's life is often made frivolously, but that it was made so consistently often with so much conviction about Brink's novels, makes one think that his work had a major impact on many readers' lives.

In primary school I was already an avid reader. I remember winter holidays when I cycled down to the public library daily because I had finished reading all the books I was allowed to take out the previous day. First I steadily read my way through all the children's books and later I used my mother's library cards to take out books from the "adult section": from Karel Kielblock and Kas van den Bergh to Heinz G. Konsalik. Louis L'Amour's westerns bought from the "Book Exchange" was my introduction to fiction in English.

In my standard 8 year, an exceptional teacher, Miss Oelofse, introduced me to Afrikaans literature. First she gave me some of Chris Barnard's short stories, which made me curious enough to search for his novel *Mahala* in the library. Thus I was introduced to the work of 'Die Sestigers' and later during my standard 8 year '*n Droë wit seisoen* (*A Dry White Season*) was published and I immediately read it. At that stage I was fifteen years old and therefore very impressionable. But I can state without trepidation that that reading experience changed my life.

This novel not only formed my political consciousness—as many others attested about reading *A Dry White Season* during the past weeks—it radically changed the way I looked at fiction and the reasons why people read books at all. *A Dry White Season* made me realize that reading is not simply a pastime, not merely about the enjoyment of being drawn into a fictional world. Reading is not only about entertainment, experiencing different emotions, about escapism or a pleasurable way of spending leisure time. Reading does not merely provide interesting characters that experience exciting adventures in exotic places...

Reading can be disturbing.

The “lies” of a fictional story can upset and annoy and confront the reader with truth. Since then, I’ve started to read differently, with an altered expectation.

In a sense, *A Dry White Season* determined my career.

Throughout my career, Brink’s novels provided a kind of guideline and I continue to set one of Brink’s novels for first year students, often against resistance. Each year I face all the objections about swear words, graphic sex and alleged blasphemy in these novels. Often I have to face parents (and once even a student’s dominee) who are upset about the disturbing effect of Brink’s novels on their children. Once I even had to defend my decision to set *Duiwelskloof / Devil’s Valley* to the dean, when students complained higher up about the atrocious Brink novel set for them. Nonetheless, I continue to set a Brink novel for the first year students, because every year there are many students who are excited, who are deeply moved, and whose lives are influenced by their confrontation with a Brink novel. This effect can obviously not be described as an “outcome”, verifiable by “data based research”, but it is this effect on students that I regard as the most important aim of teaching literature.

During the past 15 years I had the privilege of getting to know André personally. At our first meeting I was a bit awe-struck and told him about my first experience of reading *A Dry White Season*. He gracefully listened to what must have been an embarrassing tale and then told me about a man who wrote to him from India, shortly after *A Dry white Season* was published, stating that the novel actually told his story.

Indeed Brink not only had a changing effect on me, a number of my students and other South Africans, but on readers from across the world. After he had been forced by the ban on *Kennis van die aand* to write in English as well, his antithetical ideas, his questioning of the status quo, his undaunted challenging of injustice could touch many people’s lives across the world, like he touched mine.

The title of Brink’s 1992 novel, *On the Contrary*, could well serve as a motto for his oeuvre, and in fact, for his whole life. But saying “on the contrary” for Brink implied a principled opposition to all forms of repression, to every denial of freedom. But it also meant responding to repression by imagining alternatives.

Brink’s contrarianism was supported by his discovery of Camus during his years in Paris. In his memoir, *A Fork in the Road*, he writes about the influence that French writers and poets had on him and he mentions Montaigne, Voltaire, Rousseau, Balzac, Sartre and Baudelaire. But he writes about Camus like this:

And then there was Camus. Who promptly became, and still is, one of the Baudelairean *phares* of my life. I do not merely admire Camus, I love him. [...] Camus: the indefatigable persistence of Sisyphus, the revolt-without-end, the struggle, literally to death, against injustice, against the lie, against unfreedom. He provided not only a map for my explorations of Paris, of France, but a blueprint for the rest of my life.

This “revolt-without-end” against injustice, against the lie, against all that threatens freedom, ran through Brink’s whole life.

In his last novel, *Philida*, a young slave and her master’s son are caught up in an impossible doomed love affair. Brink of course often used the absolute private and individual experience of love to probe collective norms. He fearlessly interrogated the postcolonial situation by focussing on love between colonized and colonizer, between slave and master, between black and white, European and African (*An Instant in the Wind, On the Contrary, A Chain of Voices. Looking on Darkness* was banned partly due to the portrayal of love “across the colour bar”).

These impossible loves often end tragically when the lovers are forced to betray their love to fit societal norms. In *Philida* the young white man, Frans, promises the slave girl that he loves her, will marry her and grant her freedom, but eventually he lacks the courage to challenge his father’s patriarchal authority. She insists that he should deliver on his promise and has to enter her name in the Family Bible:

The more I told her it was a book for white people only, the more she kept on: It’s just a lot of names, Frans, it says nothing of white people and slaves.

Philida, it doesn’t work like that, there’s nothing you or I can change about it, this is just the way the world is.

Then we got to change the way of the world, Frans, she goes on nagging, otherwise it will always stay the same.

No, I keep telling her, some things just cannot be changed from the way the LordGod made them.

Then we got to start changing the LordGod, she says.

You don’t know that man, I warn her. He’s a real bastard when it comes to making trouble.

I tell you that I want to be in that Book, she goes on.

I’m telling you, Philida, I keep insisting, it can’t be done and it won’t be done, and that’s the way it is.

Then give the pen to me, she says in a temper one morning, when all the house people are busy outside, it is only her and me in the voorhuis. If you can’t or won’t do it, I’ll do it myself. And she grabs the pen out of my hand (*Philida* 37—8).

Protagonists like Philida who say “on the contrary”, who refuse to accept “the way the world is”, are a constant feature of Brink’s novels. In his early novels like *Lobola vir die lewe* (1962) and *The Ambassador* (1963) characters resist meaning forced on them on an existential level. (Camus’s influence is evident in these novels, but Camus remained a central guide for Brink throughout his life.) From the 1970’s onwards they refused the unjust political situation.

Like Philida, Brink refused to accept the status quo and grabbed his pen to start changing things. *Kennis van die aand* (1973) became the first Afrikaans novel to be

banned, but Brink refused to be silenced and rewrote the novel in English in order to be heard.

In one novel after the other Brink demonstrated that the way things are, is not a natural given but a construct, that can and should be challenged—even if it implied changing the LordGod himself. And in all these novels he exposed the lies that were needed to keep the world like it is. That is why the words of Ben du Toit at the end of *A Dry White Season* (1979) is also true of Brink: “Perhaps all one can really hope for, all that I am entitled to, is no more than this: to write it down. To report what I know. So that it will not be possible for any man, ever again, to say: *I knew nothing about it.*”

Creating an awareness of injustice was only one part of saying on the contrary, an ability to imagine a different world is the other part. Brink attained both due to his exceptional skill as narrator. He is often lauded as a master storyteller, his teeming imagination has been compared to Marquez and Borges and this probably explains his wide readership—in more than 30 languages all over the world.

Brink could conjure up a magic fictional world in a few sentences, whether in banal small town toilet humour (his *Kootjie Emmer*-stories), or experiments with complex modernist forms (*Orgie*, 1965) or in the unravelling and re-telling of stories in a self-reflexive postmodernist way.

Storytelling is also an important theme in his novels. Many of Brink’s characters are storytellers: Ma-Roos in *Chain of Voices*, Rosette in *On the Contrary*, Ouma Kristina in *Imaginings of Sand*, Cupido Cockroach’s mother in *Praying Mantis*. These stories show an awareness of our world as language, as story. It becomes clear that any understanding of the world as it is, is only one story. There are always other possibilities, other stories to tell. Lacking the creativity to imagine different stories leads to violent behaviour, because it causes a defence of that single story, as the old Seer Lermiet realizes in *Devil’s Valley*: “Look man, there’s nothing you can do about tomorrow. It comes as it must. All you can do something about is yesterday. But the problem with yesterday is it never stays down, you got to keep stamping on it.”

Blindly defending a single “truth”, a single story, is the uncreative response of patriarchy, traditionalism, nostalgia, nationalism and fundamentalism. In reaction to the Seer’s words, Flip Lochner thinks:

In spite of my suspicion and resentment, I felt moved by something in the old fucker, perhaps in all his breed. With the lies of stories—all the lies, all the stories—we shape ourselves the way the first person was shaped from the dust of the earth. *That* is our first and ultimate dust. Who knows, if we understood what was happening to us, we might not have needed stories in the first place. We fabricate yesterdays for ourselves which we can live with, which make the future possible, even if it remains infinitely variable and vulnerable, a whole bloody network of flickerings, an intimate lightning to illuminate the darkness inside. (*Devil’s Valley*, 287)

Stories are our ultimate dust and we need them to understand ourselves and the world. We need these fabrications, but they should remain infinitely variable. Accepting a single yesterday means that one has to keep stamping it down, forcing it on others.

Philida, like the other storytellers in Brink's novels, is imaginative, and dares to grab Frans's pen. Frans, like his father and so many patriarchs and administrators in Brink's novels, lacks the imagination to tell a new story, to make a future possible (even when he realizes that the fabrications of yesterday are no longer valid).

By telling stories we make the world human. By allowing a single story to become tantamount the way the world is, would be inhuman. Brink grabbed his pen and used his imagination to resist the inhumanity of single oppressive narratives. He made our world more human by saying on the contrary, and by constantly re-imagining the world, he made a more human future possible.

Works Cited

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