



HAL
open science

Interviews with South African Writers

Serge Breysse

► **To cite this version:**

Serge Breysse. Interviews with South African Writers. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2001, Writing in South Africa after the end of Apartheid - G.R.A.S. 4e colloque international Saint-Denis de La Réunion (7-9 décembre 2000), 21, pp.197-235. hal-02344217

HAL Id: hal-02344217

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344217>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Interviews with South African Writers

Interview with Mike Nicol (31/07/2001)

Would you say there is such a thing as Capetonian literature?

I think it's starting to evolve. The city to me is in its adolescence. It's starting to mature and with that maturing comes a kind of imaginative Cape Town which didn't exist before. There was no time or need to create, it wasn't important or it was too colonial. I think that in the last fifteen years, with apartheid starting to break down in the mid-eighties, there was a dramatic shift. Suddenly Cape Town started to take on an imaginative life greater than it had ever had before.

Can it be related to what you called metro fiction?

Ashraf Jamal's book... Hmm. It probably can but what I was hoping would happen after Ashraf's book hasn't come to pass (laughs) but it may happen. I think it's part of the maturing process in that it just takes a long time for a city to sink into the idea of itself. I think that Cape Town has just taken a long time to do this.

So he is the only one you'd put into this category?

There are four books by two writers that I would probably start to classify as metro fiction... They both write crime fiction. One, Deon Meyer, wrote two books. He is an Afrikaans writer. Both of his books have been translated into English, probably French too, because I think his books have done quite well. And

another writer called Michael Williams who has recently adapted Zakes Mda's novel into an opera and has written two crime novels which Oxford University Press here in Cape Town has published. If anything were to fall into the kind of metro fiction I was talking about it's that type of more hard-bitten fiction.

He was your really big fan for *The Waiting Country*.

Yes. Embarrassingly so. (laughs)

We've looked everywhere, here and in Reunion, tried to order it...

It's out of print.

You wrote three novels between 1989 and 1994, at a time of major political change in the country, and since then, unless I am wrong, you haven't written anymore novels.

No, there was one published in 1998 called *The Ibis Tapestry*. It's fiction that has got quite a lot of Cape Town in it, as it happens. Apart from that, the only other book I've published was a short biography of a photographer, Ken Oosterbroek. Kwela are about to publish my next book.

Annari can give you a copy of my latest book which is about to be published this month.

I know it's about the Cape.

It's a non-fiction book about Cape Town.

Can you just tell us a bit about *The Ibis Tapestry*?

Just very, very briefly. It's about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission although I wrote it before The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had started. The whole debate, the whole issue that preceded the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had begun to take hold and I just used that as a structure for the book. It's an examination that attempts to address history or to interrogate history. What have I written that's not been that? (laughs). But in a more contemporary setting. There were lots of footnotes that were all part of the narrative, not to be read as footnotes. It was an attempt to try and come to terms with

language references, what certain terms, whether in Afrikaans or English, were referring to. To try and make the statement that history is ever-present and that we are using it all the time, sometimes without knowing what the references are.

Things are changing but history is what most fascinates me about this country. I think it's what we have dealt with the least. It's what fascinates me about Cape Town in particular because it's the oldest city. And the problems that we are witnessing today with gangsterism on the Cape Flats, the current racism against the newest immigrants of blacks coming into the city... All of this stems back to how the city came about and how it was a slave city for 180 years, which is longer than it has been a "free city." And those issues, no one deals with them or tries to explain how they have influenced the city and made it what it is.

Was that because of apartheid?

Yes. Apartheid sat on everything. It sat on the colonial history and, I think, obscured it. Then when apartheid went away, everybody thought "okay, we've got rid of that and that is fine, the problem is gone" but it left us with the colonial legacy which we haven't dealt with and that's still got to be dealt with.

I spent a year in Berlin in 1997 and it was as if once they'd got rid of the GRD years, they thought it was the end of the problem. But it was the beginning of another problem, a problem that had been buried at the end of the Second World War. And I think we've got much the same sort of situation.

Horseman, which was a very dark novel, was published in 1994 at a time when things were changing politically and we'd expect something more optimistic. Was it done on purpose?

I suppose sometimes one writes books with the times sitting on one's shoulder but I'm not sure. That book was a deliberate attempt to try and understand what it had been like in a country from a colonial perspective, from the bottom rather than the top, about the ordinary people who came to the country. In a way I kind of ignored what was going on in contemporary South Africa. And I got criticised heavily for doing that and for coming out with a stark

novel which in fact in Britain they called pornographic—at a time when it was supposed to be the Rainbow Nation and all that kind of nonsense. Rainbow was a handy metaphor to use but I think it was the wrong metaphor. Even in *A Waiting Country* which I wrote within three or four months of that election, I still thought it was a silly way of describing the country. South Africa's a hybrid: it's not a rainbow.

Your books have an international audience. Is there a difference between the expectations of the critics and the readers in South Africa and those outside?

Yes, I think there are. *The Ibis Tapestry* didn't work at all outside the country possibly because the politics, in some sense, were too contemporary, and I also think because it came out in 1998 when South Africa was no longer the flavour-of-the-month. South Africa has joined the rest of the world and it's become invisible. These attitudes are, I think, starting to play a part in how South African literature is read abroad. My feeling is that we have to move, probably, towards more entertaining novels.

One of the more interesting things to me is why did *Disgrace* work so effectively for Coetzee. I think it's possibly for two reasons: there is a lot of dialogue and the novel reads very, very easily. It is many-layered but it's not like *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and it's not like *In the Heart of the Country*, and it's not like *Michael K.*, and it's not like *Age of Iron*. It's this new thing, a book that you can pick up and read at any page and go straight into the novel. It takes instantly because it's concise. There's a lot of interaction between the characters verbally and it reads fast. You can read it on a plane.

Pamela Jooste as well.

Yes, and I think that's probably what South African fiction will have to tend toward. We've been very heavy before. That doesn't mean that one starts being frivolous, it's just a change in how the stories are told.

So *Horseman* was really considered pornographic in England? There are lots of references to “shit” for instance, but it seems to fit the whole.

The book has a moral intention. It was completely misread in the UK. It was better read in the US. They understood because their history was probably similar.

Yes, the Frontier, the Indians...

But Britain had no idea and possibly they didn't want their colonial past paraded in front of their faces, but certainly it didn't work for them. Nowhere did I get a good review (laugh) *In The Big Issue*, the street magazine, they understood because it was from more their point of view, the underdogs.

You once defined your novels as jazz-novels. Could you explain that term?

What I meant was that they are just stories. They are not political treatises. They are not history either. They were attempts to take South African stories and to tell them in what I hoped were interesting ways. In this country, *The Ibis Tapestry* seemed to work partly because it was easy to read. It's certainly much easier to read than *Horseman* and does not have the juxtaposition of times which *This Day and Age* has, and also moves away from magic realism. I probably haven't answered the question... (laughs)

Beyond the South African context, is there anything African in your style of writing?

I don't think so, quite honestly. I learnt what novels were all about through school and university and that is essentially an Anglo-Saxon tradition fostered by the way novels were written in Europe and the way novels were written in the States. A novel really isn't an African form as such. Story-telling and writing are two different things altogether. Magic realism possibly tries to combine the two. So that I suppose with magic realism there was an attempt to come towards an African/oral tradition and try to work that into the fiction. But then magic realism has been a major part of German literature for a long time before it became a genre for us.

Is your fiction somehow influenced by the fact that you are a journalist?

Yes, it is. And you'll see it even more so in *Ibis*. Yes, I enjoy being a journalist. I'm doing a lot of journalism again. I stopped for a while. There was a time when I got seriously disillusioned with journalism, and then I very luckily got given a chance of writing *A Good Looking Corpse*. And that was my re-affirmation that journalism could do things and could be used to do things. After that book I started looking at journalism again in a more optimistic light, and so I have continued right up to that book on Cape Town which is really a journalistic exercise. And yes, it does break through my novels, of course.

When you were a journalist during apartheid, were there a lot of things you couldn't write about?

It was strange. I started off on a right-wing magazine, although, at the time, I didn't know it was a right-wing magazine, and I say this without any disingenuousness, I say it quite sincerely. I was so naive when I started working that the thing that interested me was poetry. Even though I had been to university and I'd taken part in demonstrations against the State, South Africa's social and political realities hadn't really impinged on my consciousness. So I went to this magazine because they offered me a job and I started working there and it was great. I was the arts-and-books editor and I thought it was a wonderful life—I could sit in the movies all afternoon. Then came a time when Connie Mulder was Minister of Information and he was doing nasty things like censoring movies and censoring plays, and in my complete and utter naivety I wrote a piece about how this wasn't "playing cricket" and how he shouldn't do this sort of thing, and who did he think he was censoring this stuff, and how could he tell us what to think and so on.

My copy, because it was the arts copy, nobody read on the magazine because they couldn't be bothered. It was about books and films and they really weren't interested, so it went straight through—the news editor didn't look at it—it went straight to the sub-editors. They subbed it and put it on the page and it went off.

The article that I had written was in a colour section of the magazine that the editor got to see on a Monday morning and as the magazine was printed that night there was no time to do anything about it. He threw a fit. He used to see John Vorster for tea, I think every Tuesday afternoon, and Vorster was then Prime Minister. Here was this article criticising the Minister of Information in a right-wing magazine that normally supported the government. I was severely told off and told that all my future copy, whatever it was, would have to go through the editor personally. I was annoyed by this and I thought it was strange, and I couldn't really understand it but I was becoming more aware of what was happening in the country by nature of my job. I had done stories in the townships where you didn't need to be a political scientist to see there was a problem.

About two months later came 16 June 1976. I had already resigned and was serving my notice month prior to joining *The Star*. On that Wednesday afternoon I was watching a movie. When I came out, the news of the troubles in Soweto was all over the billboards and I knew I had to go there the next day. I went into work the following morning and said: "Look, I'm going to Soweto. I have to see what's going on." And they said: "Ach, it's really not of big interest to us." I went anyhow and they let me go because I only had another two weeks at the magazine anyway. I went through to Soweto on a Thursday and it was just the most amazing event I'd ever seen. The next day I went to Alexandra when it caught fire and this was the first time I'd felt history! It was this huge force. I could just feel it. And it was like being high. It was the most wonderful sensation. It was frightening, it was dangerous, it was terrifying but it was so thrilling. I rushed back to the office at lunchtime and I said: "This has to be the cover story! It's the most incredible thing that is happening. It's just short of revolution. It can change the country." They said to me, "You can write a short piece, two hundred words, but it's really not that important and we are running a cover story which is on South Africa's mineral potential."

So the Monday after the 16th of June, six days later, this magazine hit the streets with South African mineral potential while the country was in flames.

That was the start of a new country for me.

At *The Star* I was on the environmental beat and one of the issues that we started coming up against was removals into the homelands, as they were then called. I began to write about what it was like out in the rural areas where people had been completely removed from somewhere they'd been for hundreds of years and put down in places where there was often nothing. One man I remember, who is now head of World Wildlife Fund, used the word "genocide" in describing the policy. It was the first time I'd ever heard the word. It was as good as killing people by moving them to areas where they actually couldn't grow anything, they couldn't have cattle because there's no grass. There's no water so they'd got to walk for miles to get to a river etc, etc. I used that quote in an article and I was censored. (laugh) This was *The Star*. It was a traditional liberal newspaper but it felt that that kind of criticism could not be tolerated. I then went to *African Wildlife* magazine as the editor and there got into trouble. The issue of rural disruption started becoming so troubling that I thought I'd go and write about wild animals. I didn't want to see the oppression. I just wanted to deal with the nice things in life but that didn't happen either. As soon as I started writing about wild life reserves and the animals in them, I had to write about the people who lived immediately outside these reserves. And often people were being removed to make these reserves bigger so it went back to the old question about moving people around the country and I started writing about this and got into trouble with the magazine's publishers.

Later I worked on a magazine called *Leadership*, a glossy magazine that started in the eighties and prided itself on running all points of view. It had government spokesmen but would go out of its way to get people who were representative of the then banned ANC and the UDF. Even on that publication a few stories weren't run for political reasons.

Your strong interest in history may have come a little from your experience in Soweto?

Yes. I was a bad scholar, and failed history at the university. Now I wish I had persevered. History is actually something that's alive and it has become a complete obsession.

Coming back to the literary world, what are the main newspapers where you'll find literary criticism?

When I was on the staff of *The Star* from 1976 to 1978, there was an eight-page tabloid once a month, devoted to books. That was a lot of space. In fact, I can remember when Christopher Mann won the Newdigate Prize for poetry at Oxford—they published the poem in the supplement. I can remember watching the poem come over the telex machine. All the newspapers used to carry substantial book pages. *The Star* carried reviews in its daily editions as well.

On the right-wing magazine where I worked we had two pages devoted to books. Since then I've watched the book pages on all the newspapers and magazines get systematically smaller and smaller and smaller until they are virtually, as they are now, almost non-existent.

The Cape Times has a page, *The Mail and Guardian* has a page.

The Afrikaans newspapers, I tend to think, have dealt with books in a far better way and probably still do but I don't read the newspapers that often. But certainly as far as Afrikaans literature is concerned, they give them a lot more attention. *The Sunday Independent*, at the moment carries, I suppose, what is regarded as a better book page. *The Sunday Times* seems to me to have down-scaled to the extent that I can't even find the book reviews sometimes. It's just got worse and worse and worse, quite honestly.

How about local publishers?

There were three publishers during the apartheid years, local ones: Ravan Press, David Philip and Ad Donker which I don't think exists at all anymore, not even as an imprint. Ravan Press may exist as an imprint but certainly doesn't exist as a publishing house. It may have been subsumed by Heinemann, I can't remember. It was one of the big ones. David Philip exists now as an imprint under a company called New Africa Books. These were the mainstays. Fortunately for poetry there is Gus Ferguson with Carapace and a few other imprints that he runs himself. One man doing this with some money that he once won in a competition,

and he just manages somehow to get enough money to keep poetry going. Otherwise half the poets who are published at the moment would never have seen the light of day. So he is the saint, as far as I am concerned, of South African poetry in English.

The University of Natal has an active press these days. Cape Town University Press does mostly academic books and so does Wits. There are other imprints on the market. Oxford has started doing a number of South African writers such as Zakes Mda and Michael Williams. The South African Penguin does a couple. Jonathan Ball also does quite a lot of South African literature people. That's about it. There are a few literary magazines too. There's a poetry magazine called *New Coin* which has been around for a long time which is published out at Grahamstown. Gus Ferguson has *Carapace*. Then there's another one called *New Contrast* which has been around since the sixties and it's still going. But that's about it. If you are a new writer now, I think the chances of getting published in a literary magazine are slight.

Of course there's Kwela. What Annari [Van der Merwe, the manager of Kwela Books] has done for writers writing in English in this country is quite extraordinary. Ashraf Jamal would never have seen the light of day. Achmat Dangor would probably have been published but possibly not as successfully as he has been. Rayda Jacobs would probably have had to battle to find some other publisher. Just those three people, off the top of my head, let alone the work she's published in Afrikaans. She's done a lot.

Because of her, one person?

Because she wasn't part of the Afrikaner establishment. She's always been a maverick. One of the things about the Afrikaans business community is that they're very sharp. They realised long ago, in 1990 or 1991, whenever Kwela was set up, that what they had to do was set up an imprint that was largely going to deal with black literature. That was what Annari was there to do—to catch the black writers writing in English. But it went beyond that when she did a lot of Afrikaans books that other press wouldn't do. She has a different way of looking at books, thank God.

Zoë Wicomb has published her last book there.

Bridget Pitt?

Well, I'm not quite sure about the literary merits of *Unbroken Wing* or the Henrietta Rose-Innes' book, a book called *Shark's Egg*.

I'm surprised Bridget Pitt didn't get a lot of criticism because her book was almost anti-political - the heroine saying that she was faking her political involvement and her jailed blacked boy friend looked ridiculous...

It was needed at the time too. We have been so conditioned that sometimes those sort of attitudes help break the conditioning. The book went down very well actually. I think Kwela sold out, which is extraordinary.

Do South African writers today get along with one another?

I don't think writers ever get on very well with each other. (laughter) There's always going to be back-biting.

But during apartheid, weren't you all rather united?

There was a difference. It was then a kind of movement so there was a cohesion. Now it's become more possibly the way it should be, more natural. (laughter)

About the tendencies you pointed out in 1996—magic realism, story as history, and metro fiction, as we already talked about—do you still think they are the main tendencies? Would you add or subtract any?

I don't know yet. I think it's still a bit early. I've gone off magic realism. I don't think it's hard enough. I'm not sure how to articulate this. It's more an instinctual feeling at the moment than anything else. There was something about magic realism, like *Ways of Dying* and in some of what Brink started doing in *Imaginings of Sand* and so on. To me there were too many literary pyrotechnics involved. We were starting to move away from a hard-hitting, sharper kind of book which I think, possibly *Disgrace* is. I think we need to switch back to less magic, more realism in order to come to terms with the current country. I think that's what

literature does. But also to try and tell the stories, I just think it should be more immediate. The way magic realism seemed to catch fire in the South American countries from the early seventies onward, I don't think that kind of story telling is working here at all even though we may be dealing with the same level of illiteracy, or literacy, whatever way one wants to measure it. Stories have to be more entertaining. And the reader has to be considered more. In the past the reader was just expected to take all kind of stuff because it was good for the cause, for the struggle. Nowadays South African writers are competing directly with writers from the States, from Britain, from Australia and translations from other countries. One needs to realise what they're doing and try and meet the challenge. I think that suddenly all the protections have gone—the trade protections before and sanctions and so on. And I think they protected writers too. Now it's all gone. It's a big world now and we've got to fight to make it.

So I don't know. I can't answer your question but, as I said, I think it's too early. A friend of mine who teaches here at the University of Cape Town, believes it takes a period of fifteen years after a major trauma before you begin to see the new literature emerging. He could be right.

Who do you think are the main new writers on the South African literary scene as far as English fiction is concerned?

The Black writers, at the moment, seem to come and go. Zakes Mda has been there for a long time. But finding new novels is very difficult. Zoë Wicomb has been around since 1988 or 1989 although there are only two books...

Bantu education smashed the writing talent and it's only the kids that'll start coming out of school, say, in either ten or fifteen years time, who might get to grips with the novel. But we are going to go through this dip while Bantu education is worked out of the system. There are a few coloured writers at the moment.

What exactly is "coloured" now? Would Rayda Jacobs or Achmat Dangor be considered coloured?

(laughs)

Yes. This is the wonderful thing about South Africa, how we break down everybody. So Rayda [Jacobs] would technically, under the old measurement, be considered coloured even though she doesn't look like it or sound like it. Technically so would James Matthews. Achmat [Dangor] has told me that technically he should be considered coloured although many people think of him as Indian.

Is there a politically correct word for coloured?

No, there isn't, but to me at the moment, it isn't helpful to start dropping the terms. I think that if we're going to face up to racism, we actually have to use the terms in order to get through this period. Today's children might not be so affected but for the rest of us there's an ingrained racism and we just have to deal with it. At the moment, I think the terms have validity because they carry social and economic information. Even coloured people will still use that term to describe themselves.

What you have to remember is that some in the coloured population are having to confront the "shame" out of which they perceive themselves to come. The shame family—"die skaam familie" to use the Afrikaans term. This sense of shame still affects some parts of the community and can be seen in gangsterism, drug usage, through rising HIV rates, TB... That shame comes out of slavery and then out of the policies of segregation.

Even though they were a step higher than the blacks in the apartheid hierarchy?

Yes. One of the reasons why there is racism in Cape Town is because of a combination of white and coloured against black. There are new black immigrants coming into the city and the business class, particularly, are finding a lot of difficulty in getting municipal contracts, building contracts because the bureaucratic hassle they come up against from whites and coloureds who control the municipality, prevents them from getting anywhere. These are the roots of Cape Town, the master and the slave in its modern form. The slave is no longer the slave—he's more or less on an equal footing with the master and they're acting against the new immigrant.

A theme that keeps coming back is the difficulty of being an artist.

In South Africa one is both a patron of the arts and an artist. You're your own patron. (laughter) I have to write journalism to support my other writing, it's the nature of the world. I'm sure they are people who don't. I'm sure that Coetzee doesn't have to work at the university. Brink likewise. But for the rest of us, even if you are selling books outside the country, it's not enough. In this country there is no tradition of advances against royalties and because the print runs are so small, the payback on a novel is really just pocket-money.

So writers do better to be published abroad?

Hell yes. My book about Cape Town has a limited market but I would not bother with a local publisher for a novel because I want to earn some money. (laughs)

But getting published in South Africa is good for beginning writers?

Yes, it does help and it has helped a lot of writers. But quite honestly, if you can get published outside the country then it's much better to do that.

How important are the prizes?

Do you know that in this country the only two prizes that are left for English novel writers are the M-Net and the Sanlam Award which has just come out. The Sanlam Award alternates between poetry, short fiction and novels, and is worth R7000. This isn't going to get you very far and it doesn't carry any kind of prestige. The price is announced on the second weekend of the Grahamstown Festival, and last year the only paper to report the winner was *The Mail and Guardian* but that was four weeks later. The M-Net prize is 40000 R which is 10000 R less than when they started it ten years ago. I know a writer who won it in the early years and was able to buy a house with the money. Today you wouldn't be able to buy a garage for your car with that. Initially the prize went to a writer of young people's literature. Brink was

shortlisted on one occasion but the money went to a kiddie's book. Coetzee was shortlisted for *Age of Iron* but again it went to a kiddie's book too. Last year Coetzee got it for *Disgrace* so there's an attempt now to make the prize prestigious. I'm not sure that it means people will actually go out and buy the book the way they do the winner of the Booker Prize in the UK, but it might coax out a couple of extra sales.

Interview with Achmat Dangor
(by Internet from 14 May to 20 May, 2001)

Which other contemporary South African writers do you feel you have the most in common with? The least? Do you consider you are part of a "new" South African literature?

This question creates a paradox for me: I am South African, and at the moment at least, write mostly about South Africa and South Africans. Yet I do not see myself as a "South African" writer. The term "South African writer" is fraught with self-defining qualities: it implies someone who has survived the apartheid darkness and who is a product of the South African political miracle. Depending on your race and political heritage (part of the liberation struggle, supporter of the ancien regime, or one of those neutral in-betweeners who sought to live normal lives in an abnormal society). "South African writers" are expected to be desperately optimistic or obdurately pessimistic. There is no room it seems, for those writers who wish merely to be writers, who wish to explore the human condition in South Africa as one would the human condition anywhere in the world.

So I don't think that I am close to any South African writers, apart from personal affinities with writers like Nadine Gordimer and Antjie Krog. The best I can say about this subject is that I will grow close to the work of relatively unknown writers like Ivan

Vladislavic who are also trying to shed their restrictive South African “skins.”

Kafka's Curse was first published in South Africa before being published in the States. Does it make any difference to you?

Not really. But the fact is that *Kafka's Curse* has done immeasurably better abroad than it did in South Africa. This is not only in terms of books sold but in the volume and quality of the reviews. I don't know whether people internationally have a more developed culture of reading or whether they have the means to pursue “creative leisure,” but foreign readers seem willing to search out books like this because it promises something new.

Kafka's Curse reflects, at some level, South Africa changing political and social climate. Would you say that its main theme is fundamentally pessimistic?

No. On the contrary, it is fundamentally optimistic. It seeks to affirm the need for (and the right of) individuals to break away from the confines of their community, language, religion, indeed to subject their very beings to change. Metamorphosis, the ability to move from state of mental being to another is a uniquely human attribute and it is what probably keeps the human race from stagnating and therefore dying off as a species.

“Realistic fantasy,” “magic realism,” “surrealistic fable,” do you recognize your work in any of those terms?

“Realistic magic” was the term used by Mike Nichol when he first read *Kafka's Curse*. He was also the first writer to support its publication. What does it mean? Perhaps that reality itself is magical, that history (in its most irrefutable form) is myth, and that the imagination is the device we use to make sense even of the greatest human folly. I would trust a novel, say, by Gunther Grass to reveal the truth behind the Nazi “reality” sooner than a serious tome by a dry, fact-tabulating historian. By the way, the same will prove true when we examine the true history of apartheid. Some crazy novelist will decipher the madness behind the mind that conceived it, not the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or historians.

Set in a multicultural context, your narrative is complex. Is it inspired by any cultural model?

The complexity of my work is an inadvertant consequence of the very complicated society in which I grew up. I was a racially hybrid child (Indian/ Javanese/ Dutch ancestry), I spent my formative years in a predominantly African (“Bantu” in the bad old apartheid days) township, my mother tongue was Afrikaans, but my means of daily communication was an isiSotho/ Afrikaans patois. My father insisted that my brothers and I attend an English-medium school. This demanded many wrenching adjustments from what I call the “lived” to the “learned” experience. That I would have rather “unsimple” world view is therefore not surprising. However, I don’t think that I consciously set out to mirror my own experiences by “layering” my work with a multiplicity of meanings. Rather, I think that my writing is “character driven,” those who people it determine the unfolding of a plot. Because I draw my characters from what I know, it is almost inevitable that my narrative is equally “unsimple.”

Beyond the South African context, is there anything African in your work?

Yes, decidedly so. My work depends on myth and legend for its structure. History is not what happens, but what ancestral voices say has happened. This is very African. Furthermore, the characters that I create find themselves constantly grappling with the often competing need to determine their own lives and the collective imperative to function within communal destinies. In *Kafka’s Curse* Omar dares to challenge his pre-ordained destiny (takdier), with tragic personal consequences that also have wider impact on those around him. This personal versus communal/ societal tension is also very African.

As a poet-novelist do you set a clear border between your purpose in your novellas/short stories compared to your poetry?

Poetry remains my abiding love, an obsession that I practice in private. Poetry provides room for precise but musical words, and

exact but nevertheless intricately woven images. I find it increasingly difficult to write poetry for public (and therefore published) consumption. Poetry also allows me to proselytise and even moralise. Prose fiction make different demands: the word is a vehicle for characters, for the telling of their lives, it must go from embarkation to destination along a route that is as clear and uncomplicated as possible. This need for “clarity” often has no room for music and rhythm, which for me is the essence of poetry. Novels and short stories, above all, must never be platforms from which the author can preach to intended readers.¹

Interview with Bridget Pitt (by Internet on 30 August 2001)

Unbroken Wing is your first novel. It's set during the last days of apartheid. Did you feel free to write novels before that time?

I did not really feel free to write novels before the end of apartheid for a number of reasons. Firstly, there was obviously a lot of censorship and anything I would have wanted to write would almost certainly have been banned in South Africa. Secondly, I found it difficult to find time and resources to devote to a more personal project such as a novel—most of my energy was directed towards bringing about change in South Africa and working in liberation organisations such as the UDF. Thirdly, I think during the political liberation struggle the question of “political correctness” was a much more thorny issue. Most people involved in that struggle were fighting against enormous odds and against a huge and powerful enemy—criticism was seen as divisive and destructive especially if it was widely disseminated. As a participant in that struggle, I would have felt the need to write a book which was quite unequivocal in its support of the liberation

¹ Since the interview, Achmat Dangor has published a new novel, *Bitter Fruit*.

movement. For me, it was only after 1990, and the freeing up of political repression, that I began to feel a greater freedom in my own thinking, and less need to “toe a line.”

There is a certain criticism of the activist scene in your book and your main character rejects political involvement. Was your book perceived as not politically correct?

There may be people who do not regard it as politically correct. That does not really concern me, as I do not believe that “political correctness” is a useful yardstick in measuring the worth of an artwork. The book certainly lampooned certain tendencies within the left (such as left-wing parties tearing each other to pieces rather than focusing on the main enemy), however as part of the left I was very much guilty of that myself. However, I also wrote with a deep respect for the many people who made huge sacrifices in the struggle. Most activists I have spoken to feel that the book does not in any way undermine the seriousness of the liberation struggle, or the sacrifices made for it, even if it exposes some of its sillier sides. I also think work which strives to be too politically correct can lose sight of the quirks and foibles of human nature. To me, heroic struggles which are fought by perfect, unimpeachable heroes are improbable and uninteresting. The truly amazing thing about courage is that it is often displayed by people who are imperfect, inconsistent, prey to curious insecurities and vanities, and yet still manage to overcome the fetters of human nature and display true heroism. I think the characters of Jack, Muriel and Ruth all do this in different ways.

Ruth doesn't enjoy her political artwork and part of her ambition is to be an artist. Do you think that art can have a social message and still be art?

I definitely think that art can have a social message and still be art—in fact, I would say that most great art has a social message in the sense that it provides some insight into our society. However, I think that if the artist feels the need to push a line, or to glorify a particular party or politician, this can seriously inhibit their work. I think Picasso is an interesting artist in this regard—although he associated with the Communist party and drew on

social themes for work such as *Geurnica*, he did not bow down to pressure to depict Mao-ist style “worker-heroes.” I also do not agree with the idea that if one is producing art for “the masses,” it has to be over-simplistic or clichéd—to me that is just perpetrating intellectual elitism.

There is a strong parallel between Ruth’s personal liberation and what was happening in the country at the time. Is history a main character in your story?

I think you could say that. South Africans are obsessed with history—we seem to spend our time either denying it, avenging it, trying to rewrite it, praying that it does not explode in our faces! I think that the year portrayed in the book (1989) is a fascinating year in history because it was such a watershed for South Africa and for the global politics generally. At the time I thought I would really like to write a novel about it, although it took me five years to get down to it.

One of the themes in your story is the difficulty in the relations between men and women (including marriage) and also inside the family circle (Ruth’s mother, Jack’s father...). Would you like to comment on that?

Difficult relations between men and women are a sort of abiding literary theme, aren’t they? I don’t think I believe that difficult relations are inevitable between opposite genders, but I think the difficult ones are more interesting to write about.

Would you say that your book definitely reflects a certain optimism about South Africa?

Yes. I was feeling very optimistic at the time of writing—we were still in the flush of our new society. Time has shown the immensity of the problems we face reconstructing this country, but I am still generally optimistic.

Why did you pick *Kwela* to be published? Could you explain how it works in a writer/publisher relationship?

I approached *Kwela* after phoning around to see who might be willing to take on a book like this. I do not have an ongoing

relationship with them, as I have not published a novel since then, although they did publish a short story. I worked with Annari van der Merwe who initially read the manuscript and then took me through the various process of editing and so on.

Who do you think are the main new writers on the South African literary scene?

I know there is a real burgeoning of South African writers, and I haven't really kept up with it. I must confess to a tendency not to read that much South African fiction, partly because there seems so much else to read, partly I think because I am looking for my own voice and do not want to be too influenced, or feel as if I am parroting other people's work. Obvious names are people like Mike Nichol, Pamela Jooste, Mariette van der Vyfer. I recently read a very interesting book called *Looking for Mr Mandini*, although I am afraid I cannot recall the author's name. It was a collection of writings by street people and down-and-outers, and I found it fascinating. One of the most exciting writers I have read is Zakes Mda, who has just published his second novel, *Heart of Redness*. I think he represents a real breakthrough, in terms of writing in a way that really transcends the confines of time and place, and touches on the universal in all of us.

Which contemporary South African writers do you feel you have the most in common with?

That is hard to answer—I see some similarities with a range of writers, although I think we are all trying to find distinct voices. I don't know if I am similar to him, but I certainly think that the way Zakes Mda reflects the interplay of history and personal lives is something I would aspire to.

What are your influences, literary and otherwise?

It's almost impossible to pin this down. I read very widely, on a wide range of topics. I have spent the past five years writing text books on Life Orientation for South African schools, and during this process read about spiritualism, ecology, social issues, history, psychology etc. Authors whose works I have found particularly inspiring are Barbara Kingsolver—notably *The*

Poisonwood Bible, Arundhati Roy, Michael Ondaatje and some of Julian Barnes.

Did your upbringing influence your writing?

Of course. Everyone's upbringing influences their writing! I was fortunate to come from a home where there were hundreds of books. Both my parents read widely—my mother was an English teacher. They also really encouraged a spirit of inquiry. The social and political context in which I grew up have also had a profound effect on my personality and on my writing.

Beyond the South African context, what is African in your style of writing?

That is a tricky one. White South Africans, as descendants from settlers, often struggle with trying to decide how African they are and what being African means. I certainly feel African and I think being African has shaped a lot about how I see the world and people and how I describe things, but I think it is pretty hard to pin it down to this word or that phrase. Some writers are lot more obviously "African" in their writing style, such as Chinua Achebe who uses idioms and a phraseology to convey a particular cultural mind set.

Do you have any particular audience in mind when you write?

Not really. One of the things I loved about *Unbroken Wing* was how the story would play itself out so differently depending on who read it—people got such different things out of it, it was almost like the story was rewritten each time it was read. I really like that dynamic between a book and its reader, and I think it's a measure of book's success if it can work for a range of different people.

Are you working on another book? May I ask what the theme would be?

I have been carrying an idea around in my head for years, and I am starting to work on it now. The theme is pretty broad but I

am hoping to focus on environmental issues and issues around land in South Africa's past, present and future.

Would you define yourself as a "Capetonian" writer?

Yes, because that is where I am based now. However, I like to think that the issues I touch on are relevant to a wide range of people and places.

Interview with Pamela Jooste (30/07/2001)

You're a very prolific writer. Since 1998 you have published a book every year. Is there any particular reason why you didn't write novels before?

I had jobs, I was doing other things. Also I think that it's because I'm the sort of writer who starts late. You have to accumulate some experience before you actually start writing. I'd done other kinds of writing—short stories, radio work—and I worked for B.P., the petrol company. We did film-making there and various corporate things. So I was working all the time. I was writing but I wasn't writing novels. I started writing novels just before I turned fifty which, my publishers tell me, is not all that unusual. Unless you're writing about swinging London, that sort of thing, most writers tend to be in their forties or older.

Your books have an international audience. Is there a difference between the expectations of critics and readers in South Africa and those abroad?

Yes. It's very difficult for me to speak for critics but I think that, first of all, they read the books in a different way. In South Africa they see nuances in the books that you wouldn't really understand if you lived in England. South Africans get attached a lot more. I get a lot of reader response from all over the world but even more from South Africans. They're very much affected by my books because they miss home, you see. So in England I'm

well-received and I have a reasonable amount of sales but my real market is South Africans and ex-South Africans. They read the books totally differently because they're not just reading the story of what happened in another country—they're reading their own lives. That's what I keep getting. They say, "Oh, my grandmother was like that" or "I remember standing at the station saying good-bye to my husband when he went into the army." It's a society that's been through so much pressure that I find a lot of the readers want to talk. I become like a psychiatrist, I think it's very dangerous. (laugh). They write to say that they've had that type of experience. It's quite interesting.

When you write, do you keep in mind that your audience is international?

Not at all, and I think that would be a very wrong way of doing it. I just write the story. Basically I wrote my first book, *Dance With a Poor Man's Daughter*, because I was ready to write a book. I didn't do it in a way like sitting down and saying, "I'm going to earn my living being a writer." I just thought that there was a story I wanted to tell about another racial group, the coloured people in the dock area whom I grew up with. For a long time I thought a coloured person from that community would write about it but it just didn't happen. And then I thought that if I didn't do that book—and I really wanted to—time and the people who lived in that particular era would move on, that if the story wasn't told, it would die. So I did tell it.

One of the reasons the book got so much attention was that South African critics said that I was appropriating somebody else's story. That's silly. Then you may as well say, then how could Flaubert write *Madame Bovary*. It's genderish. It should have been written by a woman. It's silly, so I thought I won't enter that debate, but I certainly got a lot of flak for that and it just brought the book to the public attention and sold lots of copies. (laugh). It's ironic.

Did writing become easier or harder for you after your first book?

With your first book you don't know if you can do it. Secondly, you don't know how it will be received. You don't know how to work at the technical things like how to plan your work day—this is what you overcome in your first book. Then your publisher gets very worried about if you're going to write a second book because, of course, a lot of people don't write a second book. The first book is often an autobiographical book, it's the coming-of-age novel, it's the *bildensroman* and you just don't have anything else to say. So certainly with most big London publishers like Transworld, whom I published with, they give you a contract for two books and an option on a third in the hope that you're going to be an on-going writer for them. So the second book becomes very difficult. If you write to please yourself and you tell the stories you want to tell, you take the pressure off yourself and start telling the stories.

Did your upbringing influence your writing?

Oh, totally, absolutely! I keep writing my mother over and over again. My mother's dead but I keep writing her. I went to a fund-raiser for a ballet association on Saturday night and a young woman said to me, "Oh, I've read your book. The mother-daughter relationship is quite interesting." I get a lot of feed-back from people talking about their relationship with their mother. So, yes, of course, absolutely.

Who do you think are the main new writers on the South African literary scene as far as English is concerned?

I think it's a problem. I don't think that there are enough of them. I think that the problem is two-fold. First of all, English-speaking South Africa is a very small part of the population. The black populace have had this record of abysmal schooling and, in any event, English is not the mother-tongue. So black people who are not only schooled in English and who have English as a home language but have also been brought up in the English literary canon, are very few. That's one problem. The other problem is that so many writers are living abroad and once you become an exile, you really cannot write about what's happening here. You just can't. You have to live here. So you will get lots of South African

childhood stories written by people who haven't lived here for years. But there are a few coming up. There's Henrietta Rose-Innes, a very good book. Perhaps not a lot of men but there are men writing. There should be more but there aren't really very many.

Which writers do you think you have the most in common with?

Oh, funnily enough, the Americans. I love Raymond Carver. I just love his spare prose. Ernest Hemingway in his good days before he took to drink. I love that pared-down, spare unelaborated prose. These are the kinds of books I like best, when they got right to the matter. But I have many writers that I like. I'm reading Philip Roth's new book at the moment. I've just done a book review of the Chinese writer who won the Nobel Prize. So I read quite widely but for favourites, I think somebody like Raymond Carver. I like very few adjectives.

You were referring to *Shark's Eggs* before...?

Yes, by Henrietta Rose-Innes. It was very well-received. She's a new writer, one of John Coetzee's students, and I think he's given her a quote at the front of her book. Patricia Pinnock's book is short-listed for the Sunday Times literary award. She's very good. There are the writers who are very well-established like Zakes Mda and, obviously the old guard—André Brink and John Coetzee and people like that. Then there's Jo-Anne Richards. She did one book that was well-received called *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*. The second book which she was very brave to call *Back to the Lighthouse* or something. She shouldn't have had that Virginia Wolf reference. It didn't sell and she hasn't written another. There's another author called Jenny Hobbs who also was well-received with *The Sweet-Smelling Jasmine* and *Thoughts in a Makeshift Mortuary*, but then she also stopped writing. So it's like the two-book crisis point, whether you're going to keep on doing it or not.

How do you pick your subjects?

I think they pick me actually. I'm always in trouble for writing about others and I've had critics say, "Isn't it time you wrote about somebody like yourself? What's your problem?" I don't know.

They just happened to be subjects that interested me. In fact, the second book is about the well-known image of a person who's a prisoner and who's in the power of someone. This is an extraordinary, complicated relationship. People ask if it's a true story. Of course it is. South African writers are far too inhibited. It's difficult to find your subjects. You might want to write something frivolous but you can't do that because of the politics in this country.

Your books seem to be half political, half about family relationship...

What I tried to do, because I think people know the politics of this country very well—goodness knows, there's been enough exposure—I really tried just to tell the story and let the people put in the background because there're able to do that. I'm a writer who very much believes in my collaboration with the readers. I know that my readers are smart and well-read so I don't have to spoon-feed them. They can work things out for themselves. We have a contract. I get an incredible amount of reader feed-back. You'd be quite surprised. Really, they tell me all kinds of things about their private lives. I get E-mail, I get letters. In London, people write to my publishers—from London, from Australia. Here, people look me up in the phonebook, they ask bookstores and libraries. So I get a lot of input.

Beyond the South African context, what is African in your style of writing?

I'm afraid to say... very little. Obviously I read Ben Okri, I've met Sitze Mongumba... but I haven't come across any really big body of African writing in English so I would tend to think maybe we have a colonial school of writing in the Commonwealth context, not English but not African. When you go to something like the Commonwealth Prize and meet the Australians and the Sri

Lankans and the other people who are eligible, you realise that you are all coming from the same base, that is the colonial base.

But you have some African myths in your last two books and a lot about the Bushmen in *Like Water in Wild Places*.

Actually what happened to me is that I became interested in the Bushmen when I was in Kimberley in an art gallery. I found a big pile of clippings that somebody had taken—the clips of the most amazing stuff with these Bushmen legends in them. They came from doctoral theses, they came from bee-keepers' magazines. It was the most incredible resource and they let me use it. All I had to do was choose what really appealed to me and just check that it was legitimate because most people abroad associate the Bushmen with Lauren Van der Post. That's quite dangerous because he did them a disservice. He put such a focus on them, the whole thing started to crumble. You've got to be quite careful. So I became interested in the Bushman legends. The ghost was simply because my publisher said that people don't understand the history of the Afrikaners so you'll have to do something to tell this history but you've got to do it very quickly. So putting the ghost in was a way of doing it. But I got to like her in the end, I must say.

I wasn't sure of the name *Hartmann*, if it was English or Afrikaans...

It's in fact a German derivative name, so it is an Afrikaner's name. But your comment is interesting. I wanted to be quite careful not to tap into, "Oh, here's another bad Afrikaner. This is what made him that way." I wanted to keep it a bit nebulous so that he wasn't type-cast. I wanted him to be free of certain assumptions that people would probably make if the family had a typical Afrikaner name.

Much of your writing is from a child's point of view.

I was a very happy child, I have a long memory and I like the perspective of the child. I specifically wanted my first book to be from a child's point of view because she was old enough to observe everything around her but she was too young to be politicised. That gave me exactly the device I needed to write the

kind of book I wanted. She had no political point of view. She was simply a siphon through which everything came and that left the reader free to have a point of view about what was happening.

It's also nice to write from a child's point of view because you don't have to use a lot of words. I like that too. Nobody would expect a twelve-year-old to be doing fancy things with language. I like simple words, I like things that are pared-down so the child's point of view enables you to do that. And that book is now a recommended book for school reading so it's worked out quite well. I go and speak to the schools and they identify with the child because they're that age themselves. It's a very gentle way to bring them into the social history of their own country because what's very nice is that they're really not aware of what happened. To them, it could be the history of any country, not necessarily their own. It's interesting and nice to see.

Would you say that your books reflect a very positive, optimistic vision of South Africa?

Yes, I think so because I'm a naturally optimistic person and I have a lot of confidence in the capability of people to change and to get out of whatever messes they happen to get into. We all get into messes in our lives in the personal sense and we have it here in a broader sense. I think so many people are so pessimistic. Somebody sent me a cutting out of *The New Statesman* which said, "Nadine Gordimer is like the moon. She sheds a lot of light on things but she has no warmth." And I think that this comment is probably quite fair. I think that people deserve some warmth because there is a lot of good going on here and I do feel positive about it. I'd hate to leave people feeling how they felt when I finished reading *Disgrace*.

Have you read Brink's new book?

Rights of Desire. Yes, I have. South African fiction is depressing. I do and I don't know why. We all know what's going on around us but you can take out of that anything that you like. You can take the up-lifting things, you can take the depressing things. If I may say so I think they are both very fine writers but I think that both Brink and Coetzee are going through some kind of

mid-life crisis because they keep on writing about relationships between old men and young girls. Everything ends badly which I could have told them before they started writing because that's life. *(laugh)* But that's just a by-the-way. They're obviously both wonderful writers. I was at a lunch at a hotel with André Brink and he told me that he and John Coetzee, who is his colleague at the university, were both writing books which were very similar and they didn't know it. When Coetzee published, Brink read his book and realised they were both on the same track, so he changed his ending. Instead of putting a rape in, which he'd wanted, he made a failed attempt because Coetzee had had one. They're working with those dark things that have to be expressed too.

And you don't get criticised for not being serious enough?

No, not really. I think it makes for a nice change from all the bleak books the critics have to read. They probably enjoy a cheerful book for a change. *(laugh)*

You told me you were working on a new book.

Yes, I'm working on a new book. I've been asked to write about what it's like to live here now as opposed to the recent past. I'm the only person left in the whole country who thinks living here now is extremely fun. There are some very, very funny things that happen. The sort of things I find funny are, for example, being invited to a literary awards dinner where they say you have to wear either evening dress or traditional dress. All the black-skinned people will wear tuxedos and evening gowns and the white-skinned people are wearing Winnie turbans and Mandela shirts. So the whole thing gets turned around. I was on the phone with my publisher one day and one of the ground staff here was knocking on the door to tell me that there was a puff adder at the swimming pool and would I come and sort it out. My publisher has no idea what it's like here. She's never been to this country. So I told her I'd phone her back. We've got a snake rescue unit on the mountain. The puff adders get thirsty so they get the snake and take it off the mountain. But I'm sure it comes right back here again. In any case I phoned my publisher back and she said, "You're joking." I said,

“No, I’m not joking. That’s what it’s like here.” You fly up to Johannesburg and the young chap who fetches you at the airport is wearing a gun in case you’re hi-jacked. People not from South Africa can hear what you’re saying but they can’t imagine, when you’re sitting in their civilised office with them, that a perfectly normal person is living this sort of life. Maybe it’s black humour but I think people from here need it to get through their days. That’s what they’d like me to deal with more in my new book. So I’m going in that direction and it’s actually quite fun.

Who else have you seen?

I saw André Brink last week.

Isn’t he a nice man? He’s exceedingly modest and absolutely charming. And I think you mentioned Mike Nicol. He’s nice too and he does a lot of magazine and newspaper writing as well as his fiction.

And Rayda Jacobs in a couple days.

Rayda Jacobs and I were invited by PEN in Stockholm to be their guests. Four South African women writers. What they wanted were four different colours but they couldn’t say that—they didn’t want to be racial so it got quite funny. (*laugh*) In any case, in the end they got what they wanted. Rayda wrote a book called *The Middle Children* and that’s what she is. She prefers to be called a Muslim, to be referred to by her religion but she is in fact a woman of colour. She wrote *The Slave Book* and *Eyes of the Sky*, so she is sort of writing out of that community. Rayda hasn’t lived in this country for a very long time. She lived in Canada and she came back after the election. But she had a very bad experience because she was carrying a fake identity card when she was quite young, to enable her to go to college in town, and she got picked up by the police. They were not interested in her but they wanted to know who was counterfeiting these cards. So she came to the conference. And there was Maggie Williams who is an oral, traditional story teller, who lives in Capetown, and Sindiwe Magona. She wrote *Mother to Mother* and *My Children’s Children*. They are not novels but short stories. They were looking for novelists but they simply couldn’t find any black woman novelists. So Sindiwe came

along. You'll find Rayda very interesting. She's very beautiful. She's nice—you'll like her. She's had a different life. She's busy working on a book at the moment about her family. She told us that in families of colour, the light-skinned one is the prized one and she is in that position which caused her to have sibling problems. She'll tell you. She's very interesting. You aren't interviewing Ken Barris? He won the M-Net Award with *The Jailer's Book*. He's a teacher at the Technikon. He's written a book since then but I don't know what it's called. But *The Jailer's Book* was well received. If it interests you in the scope of what you're doing, Patricia Pinnock has written children's books up until now but I think she's on a long safari. And you're not seeing Zakes Mda?

No, I would like to but I don't think he lives in Capetown.

No, I don't think so. He's got a play on here at the moment. It might be worth E-mailing him because he won the Commonwealth Best First Novel just the year before me and he's just won the Best Novel for Africa but, of course, the ultimate prize went to Peter Carey for the second time. Not that you can always judge by prizes but it's interesting to know who's working.

In your first book about the Cape coloured, *Dance With a Poor Man's Daughter*, you didn't use any of their language so it took me about 50 pages to figure out that the family was coloured—not that I usually like reading dialect.

For exactly that reason. But strangely enough, once I went to speak at a library where someone told me that a graduate student of his was coming along and she wants to speak to you about something. She's a so-called coloured young woman and she's going to look for you. Later when I finished speaking and was in a whole group of people, she came over and said, "Are you Pam Jooste" and when I said, "Yes I am," she burst into tears because she couldn't believe I was white.

But if I were to use a kind of vernacular, it would be like writing in a broad Scot's dialect and nobody would understand me. So although within the framework of a coloured family, someone like the graduate student will read the book and know that her

aunts and her mother don't speak to each other like that. But if I wrote the way they really speak, it wouldn't sell. It's the same as using words that people outside South Africa don't understand. For example, Ramadan here in the Cape is called Langbaran and it's unknown anywhere else. So if you want to use words like that, you must either put a glossary in—which I don't like because I think it gets in the way—or otherwise you must put it in a sentence where it's easy to understand. My third book is being translated at the moment and there have been problems with the Swedish translation about the Namqualand plants. In the end I had to phone Kirstenbosch Gardens to get all the Latin names and the translator went to the Botanical Society in Stockholm and went from Latin into Swedish. It was really a lot of work for her and it's not even a technical book. But suddenly you're talking about what you call a little flower on Table Mountain and she's trying to put it in a context that the Swedes can understand. So it was quite a struggle.

You got published first in England instead of passing through here. Is there any particular reason?

Yes, remember how we talked about how my writing would be classified. It's not African writing. So if you're going to write in English it seems that you have to go in at the really deep end and the deep end for English is part of the Commonwealth, London is the logical place to go because that's where you're going to have the most competition. It's highly competitive, as you know, and hard to get accepted there. So if you want to do things in the proper way, you can't take short cuts. So that's what I did. If I hadn't got published, I would simply have done something else with my life. I just had to do it that way because that's what I'm like.

But if you hadn't got published there, you could have tried another publishing house like Kwela or David Philip.

I could have but I don't think so. I worked in publishing when I was very young. I'd done a stint in London with Hoddon and Stoughton so I knew what London publishing was about. I'd only worked there for about three months on an exchange scheme but I was familiar with it. So I wanted to be published in London.

There's a debate that goes on in this country that the big-selling authors should be published here and if we sold thousands of copies, which we do, the money generated by that would help the up-and-coming authors. I didn't know about that debate until fairly recently, within the last year, when the younger writers said, "Well, it's all very well for you and for André Brink to go off, but if you'd stayed and published here, you could have done more." Someone like Nadine Gordimer actually has a split-publication. She publishes locally and she publishes abroad so I think she's covering the bases by doing that. I hadn't thought of that. You're never sure if you'll be accepted or not but I got accepted very quickly. I didn't have rejection letters. My agent put my book up for auction to three publishers and when one makes a bid on it, then you tell the others that there's a bid on the table and they either offer or they don't. In my case there were four publishers. Three made offers and the fourth said it was unreadable. I always tell people that because that's what books are like. You shouldn't be despondent because what you need is to connect with a single reader and if you connect with someone who happens to be the commissioning editor, then you're lucky! If you don't connect, it doesn't mean your book is bad. It just means you haven't got lucky. So that's what happened. I was lucky and I didn't have to wait for ages going through lots of rejection slips. I had to wait for two weeks and if I hadn't sold my book then, I would have gone ahead and done something else with my life. Because I don't believe in Literature with a capital L. It's just telling stories. It's nice to do but it's not that precious.

Frieda and Min are so different and the brother and sister in your last book are so different yet they stay friends. Do you think that in real life people who view the world so differently can be real friends or was it more a literary device?

I don't think so. I think it happens a great deal in real life. Part of friendship is accommodating differences. It would be a very sad world if we were all the same or only saw the people who were the same as us. In this country it's more than ever important to learn to accommodate other people's differences. Unlike, for example, England—which is the other only foreign country I

know—where in the countryside people are so alike. And we don't have that luxury here. We're dealing with people who are totally different from us. There are huge differences in education, in culture and yet there are friendships springing up because of a common humanity and I think that one needs to concentrate on that. About *Frieda and Min*, I had a letter from a reader in Israel wondering how I could get under the skin of two women so different. Well, in fact my grandparents were Jewish so it wasn't that different for me. I have Jewish cousins and so on so I move quite comfortably in that milieu.

But during the apartheid days, people were on different sides. You were here. I would think it would be hard if you were politically committed to have a real friendship with someone who wasn't.

I think it probably was very hard but it depends on what sort of stresses and strains were put on you. Not everyone was at the same speed so you would have to agree to differ. Perhaps you'd come from a common childhood which was the basis of your friendship, and life is about making accommodations.

The coloured child in *Dance With a Poor Man's Daughter* finds she has music in common with the white Jewish man in her neighbourhood.

Yes, it's always such a relief when you discover that someone who is very different from you reads the same books or enjoys the same music... that there are things that bring you together.

I must, incidentally, just tell you that the four women who went to the PEN conference together didn't get on that well. We were very different and there was a lot of friction. For example, Rayda Jacobs who hadn't lived here for such a long time referred to Sindiwe Magona as a *Bantu*, not knowing it was politically incorrect. So Sindiwe, thereafter, kept talking about Rayda's "coloured roots" which drove her nearly crazy. Then Sindiwe would stand up and say that when she was growing up she had trouble getting an education but not Pam, just because she was born white. These are all valid issues. The Swedes who do

everything to an extreme said, "Don't you feel peculiar as you are kind of representative of the oppressor group?" So I said that it had occurred to me that it would make my position difficult... My story, if you like, wasn't as interesting as theirs since my life had been a privileged life, an ordinary life. And they said they were now doing theses about the role of the oppressor. They were very sympathetic to people thrust into this role. Only the Swedes have the luxury to think of things like that. They wanted us to speak about our lives—which we did—and they asked if, when we went back, we could keep PEN going in this country. The answer is: with very, very great difficulty because our lives are too different and the divisions are still too great, and it just became very obvious. What was interesting too was that we went to speak to a group of sort of post-matric, first-year university students and they said that our body language on the platform showed who got on and who didn't. I think they were absolutely right.

But I find it so interesting what makes other people tick. I really like people but I must say I get very despondent when I read books like *The Rights of Desire* and others like that, because it really is dwelling on so many bleak aspects. No joy in it. What's the point of life without joy? Joy is very important.

Brink writes in two languages at once, as you probably know. As his thought processes change, he might change from one language to another. That's how he works. It makes an interesting parallel. I went to a reading he gave once and he read a piece in English and somebody asked if he would read it in Afrikaans. So there was the writer reading his own work and the signals you got, the mental pictures were different. It was quite an eye-opener. I can read books in both languages but I hadn't realised that to have the two read aloud like that, I got a completely different set of images.

There are very few people actually chronicling what's going on here now. Rayda Jacobs went back to slave times.² Maybe the new young writers who were less influenced by apartheid will be writing about today more.

² Since the interview, Rayda Jacobs has published a new novel, *Sachs Street*, which has a contemporary setting.

What do you think of local publishers?

The local publishers are quite amazing. I know they have a difficult time to get money and keep everything going but they do find exciting things. And the *Mail and Guardian* are now starting their own publishing enterprise. They've just put out a book that was reviewed in *The Independent Sunday*. It's got Bugs Bunny on the cover. It strikes me that it might be in the Brett Easton Ellis mould but it's very nice that there's a new publisher starting out. It's important because the old-fashioned way that I did it—going through the list of London publishers—is very difficult. They just take out one or two a year of writers from other countries. For them the South African or Australian stories are fairly exotic unless you reach a level like John Coetzee has.

What about Kwela?

Annari [Van der Merwe] has been largely instrumental in helping the New York University Press to build up her base of South African women writers. I think it's a feminist press there. She introduced me to one of the editors who was out here and as a result I sold *Dance* to the feminist press. Somebody else she linked up with them is Zoë Wicomb who has just published again and she's also short-listed for the *Sunday Times* award.

Annari is excellent and she's at the heart of what's happening, especially among the young-and-coming writers.

Interview with Peter Horn (by Internet on June 9, 2001)

Your collection of stories *My Voice is Under Control Now* was first submitted in manuscript under the title *The Kaffir who Read Books*. Why did you pick a different leading story?

I didn't, the publishers were a bit nervous about the first title. They wanted to avoid a misunderstanding. I accepted their decision.

Is your decision to write short stories—as opposed to poetry—somehow related to the changing social and political climate in South Africa?

Yes. Poetry functioned in the struggle years as a succinct and orally easily transmittable medium. There is a very small audience for poetry in South Africa (editions usually about 200-400 copies). Orally I could reach tens of thousands. Now the opportunities for such readings no longer exist in the same way (demonstrations, rallies, funerals).

As the end of the struggle became apparent, I needed more space to explore some of the contradictions of the South African experience. To write prose also was an exciting challenge for me, after writing poetry exclusively. (I must admit that I tried novels, but never got it right).

The short story allowed me to explore a whole range of different characters.

Do you set a clear border between your purpose in your short stories compared to your poetry?

In a way, yes. Short stories are about plot, character, tone of voice, contradictions, a more objective way of writing. Poetry is about metaphor, interpellation, subjectivity.

Some of your stories refer directly to the past darkness of apartheid, others are universal and timeless and also extremely dark and violent. Would you say they are fundamentally pessimistic?

“Pessimism” is the only “realistic” stance anywhere. Expect the worst and attempt to influence the events towards the better. “Optimists” are usually simplistic and populist. People do not want to be told that things are in bad shape, that the ice is going to melt, that there is corruption and violence. But unless you face this, you cannot change it. Violence is a universal problem and it surfaces most often when people are “weak,” when they feel there is no way of rationally controlling their social surrounding. Violence is something which is very attractive to most people, even confirmed pacifists. It seems to be a solution when in fact it usually makes the

situation even more intractable. I think to explore violence makes sense in a very violent society, even after 1994.

In a story like "Practical Criticism" you deal with the relationship between critics and writers in a very cynical way. Do you think that this relationship is special in South Africa? Is there a difference between the expectations of critics in South Africa and abroad as far as South African writers are concerned?

No, I do not think that it is special to South Africa. Books are marketable goods, and the laws of the market and marketing are the same everywhere. What is South African is the smallness of the market, the fact that everyone knows everyone.

Some, but not all South African critics have a very colonial attitude: they do not believe that anything good can come from South Africa. They tend to notice South African writers once they have been praised in Britain and America, and sometimes not even then. On the other hand, most overseas critics seem to think that only "blacks" are authentic voices for South Africa. So I tend not to fulfill the expectation of most of them.

Which other short story writers do you feel you have the most in common with? The least? Do you consider you are part of a "new" South African literature?

Difficult to say. Vladislavic perhaps. Again, there is no such thing as "South African" literature. There are SA literatures. I think I am part of this multitude of differing voices. In the end the readers have to decide what I am.

*Serge BREYSSE*³



³ Université de La Réunion, 15 avenue René Cassin, BP 7151, 97715 Saint-Denis Messag. Cedex 9.