

Huldeblyk: André P Brink

Die afgelope tyd het daar baie huldeblyke aan André Brink op talle forums verskyn. Een opvallende opmerking wat telkens in byna elke huldeblyk voorkom, is dat een van André Brink se boeke 'n groot effek op hulle gehad het. Die opmerking dat 'n sekere boek 'n mens se lewe verander het, word meestal heeltemal te maklik gemaak, maar die feit dat dit so konsekwent en met soveel oortuiging in hierdie huldeblyke voorkom, laat mens vermoed dat Brink se romans werklik 'n baie groot impak op mense gehad het.

Ek was reeds as laerskoolkind 'n ywerige leser. Ek kan veral wintervakansies onthou waartydens ek byna daaglik met die fiets biblioteek toe gery het omdat die boeke wat ek toegelaat is om uit te neem reeds deurgelees was. Eers het ek al die kinderboeke deurgewerk en toe met my ma se biblioteekkaartjies aan die "grootmenskant" gaan boeke uitneem. Van Karel Kielblock en Kas van den Bergh tot Heinz G. Konsalik. Louis Lamour-cowboyboekies van die kafeerak af en uit die tweedehandse boekwinkel het my Engels laat laas.

Eers in standerd 8 het 'n spesiale onderwyseres, Juffrou Oelofse, my Afrikaanse letterkunde laat lees. Sy het my eers Chris Barnard se kortverhale laat lees – wat daartoe gelei het dat ek Mahala uitgeneem het. So het ek van Die Sestigters gehoor en gedurende my standerd 8-jaar verskyn *'n Droë wit seisoen* toe. Ek was 15 jaar oud en dalk net daarom baie vatbaar vir nuwe indrukke. Maar ek kan onomwonde stel dat daardie roman my lewe verander het. Dit het my nie net 'n politieke bewussyn by my gevorm nie – soos baie ander mense die afgelope tyd geskryf het. *'n Droë wit seisoen* het my heeltemal anders laat kyk na wat en hoekom 'n mens lees. Dit is die roman wat my laat besef het dat lees nie net 'n tydverdryf is nie, nie bloot die genot is van ingetrek word in 'n fiksiewêreld nie. Lees is nie bloot vermaak, emosionele vervoering, ontsnapping of vryetydsbesteding nie. Lees bied nie bloot interessante karakters wat opwindende avonture in eksotiese ruimtes beleef nie. Lees is ontstellend. Die leuens van stories kan mens omkrap, ontstig, insig bied. Daarna het ek anders begin lees, met ander verwagtings.

Op 'n manier het 'n *Droë wit seisoen* my op 'n loopbaan geplaas.

Deur my loopbaan het Brink se romans 'n soort riglyn gebly en ek skryf jaar vir jaar, soms teen groot aanvanklike weerstand in, 'n Brink-roman aan die eerstejaars voor. Ek antwoord maar geduldig studente se besware oor die vloekwoorde, die skunnighede en die vermeende godslastering in die romans. Dikwels moet ek hulle ouers (en selfs al by een geleentheid 'n student se dominee) te woord staan oor die ontstellende effek van Brink se romans op hulle kinders. Ek moes al selfs aan die dekaan verduidelik toe studente besluit het om oor my kop heen by hom te kla oor die gruwelike boeke wat ek voorskryf. Nogtans skryf ek onverskrokke Brink voor. Want elke jaar is daar talle studente wat opgewonde raak, wie se lewens ten diepste geraak en verander word deur die romans. Hierdie effek is natuurlik nie iets wat as 'n "uitkoms" vasgepen kan word nie en wat nie deur "datagebaseerde navorsing" vasgestel kan word nie, maar dit is juis hierdie effek op studente wat ek eintlik as die belangrike doel van literatuuronderrig beskou.

Die afgelope 15 jaar het ek die voorreg gehad André ook persoonlik te leer ken. En by een van die eerste geleenthede het ek hom vertel van my ervaring van 'n *Droë wit seisoen*. Hoflik, soos hy altyd was, het André met grasie my opgewonde lof erken en toe vertel dat hy een keer 'n brief van 'n man uit Indië ontvang het wat vir hom geskryf het om te sê dat 'n *Droë wit seisoen* eintlik sý storie is.

Brink het inderdaad nie slegs 'n veranderende effek op net my, of my studente, of ander Suid-Afrikaners gehad nie, maar op lesers van regoor die wêreld. Toe hy noodgedwonge na die verbod op *Kennis van die aand* in Engels ook begin skryf het, kon sy stroomop-idees, sy bevraagtekening van die *status quo*, sy onverskrokke uitwys en uitdaag van onreg, die lewens van veel mense regoor die wêreld raak soos wat hy my lewe geraak het.

The title of André 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.

Hierdie opstand van Brink is ook ondersteun deur sy ontdekking van Camus in sy Paryse jare. In sy memoir, *'n Vurk in die pad*, skryf hy oor die invloed van Franse skrywers en digters op hom en hy noem die name van Montaigne, Voltaire, Rousseau, Balzac, Zola, Sartre en Baudelaire maar dan skryf hy soos volg oor Camus:

En dan was daar Camus. Wat dadelik een van die Baudelaireaanse vuurtorings van my wêreld geword het. Dis nie net dat ek Camus bewonder nie: ek het hom lief. (...) Camus: die nimmereindigende aanhou van Sisuphos, die opstand-sonder-einde, die stryd tot die dood toe teen onreg, teen die leuen, teen alles wat vryheid bedreig. Hy het my nie net 'n kaart gegee vir my ontdekking van Parys en van Frankryk nie, maar 'n bloudruk vir die res van my lewe.

Hierdie "opstand-sonder einde" teen onreg, teen die leuen, teen alles wat vryheid bedreig loop deur sy hele oeuvre.

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 (*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 37-38).

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 story teller, 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 (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 story-tellers: 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:

Teen my agterdog en my wrewel in is daar iets in die befokte ou man wat my ontroer; in hom soos in almal hier, en miskien, wie weet, oral. En ek dink: met die leuens van stories – al die leuens, al die stories – maak ons onself soos wat die eerste mens uit die klei van die aarde gemaak is.

Want dit is ons eerste en laaste klei. Wie weet, as ons verstaan het wat met ons gebeur, sou ons nie stories nodig gehad het nie. Ons maak vir ons gisters waarmee ons kan saamleef, wat die toekoms moontlik maak, alles bitterlik bedreigbaar en veranderlik, 'n hele fokken netwerk van flikkeringe, 'n soort van intieme weerlig om die binneste donker te verlig (Duiwelskloof 297).

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.