



Brink reflected himself in his characters who refused to accept the status quo, writes Willie Burger

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.

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 post-colonial situation by focusing on love between the colonised and coloniser, 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 he should deliver on his promise and has to enter her name in the family Bible.

This is captured in this excerpt: "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 Lord God made them."

"Then we got to start changing the Lord God, 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



LASTING IMPRESSION: South African novelist André Brink strikes a pose in this undated photo. PICTURE: AP

A 'contrary' man who stood by his principles

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. (Albert Camus's influence is evident in these novels, but Camus remained a central guide for Brink throughout his life.) From the 1970s 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 another Brink demonstrated the way things were, as not a natural given but a construct that can and should be challenged even if it implied changing the Lord God himself.

And in all these novels he exposed the lies that were needed to keep the world as it was.

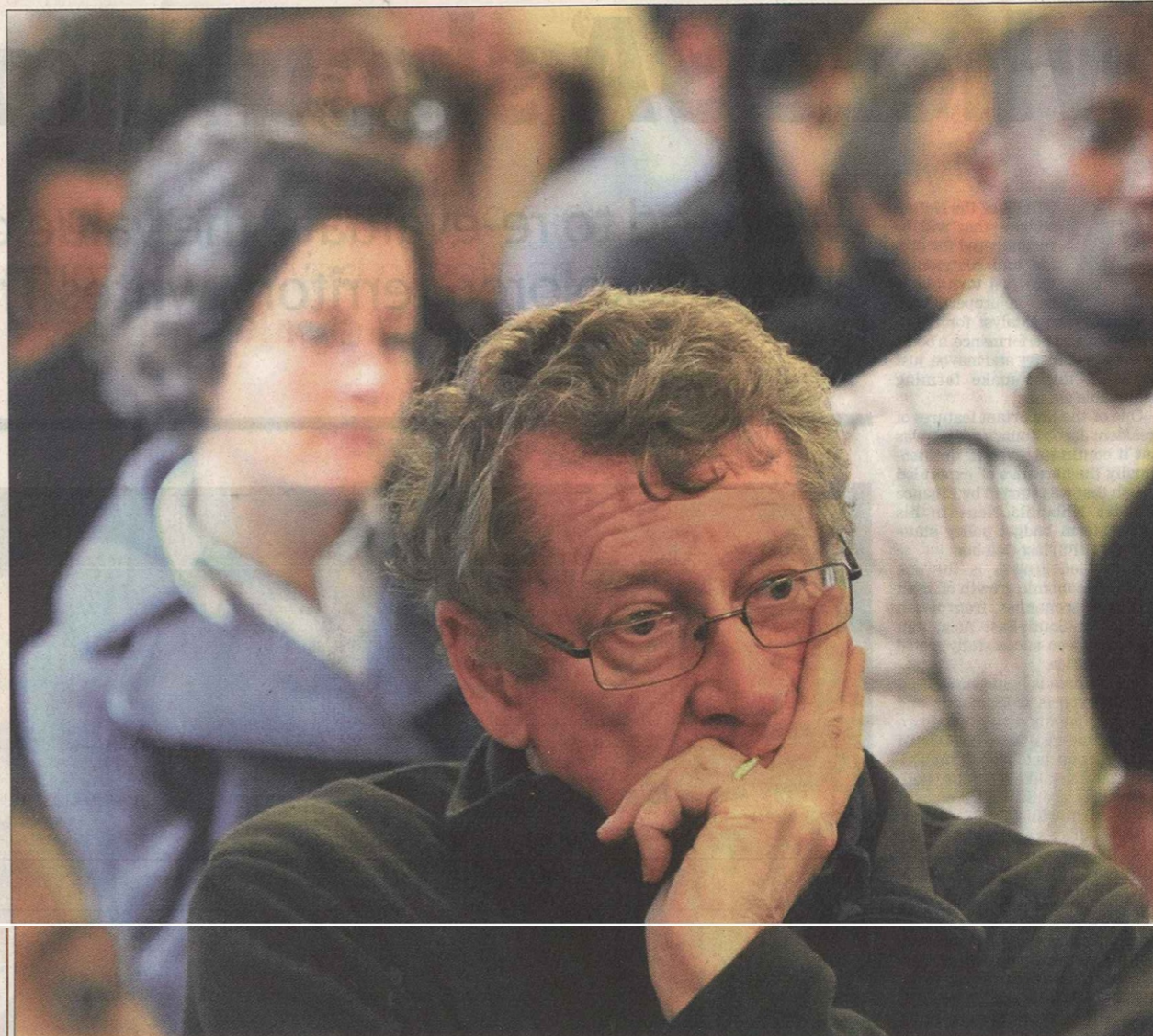
That is why the words of Ben du Toit at the end of *A Dry White Season* (1979) is also true of Brink:

"Perhaps all one can really hope for, all that I am entitled to, is no more than this: to write it down."

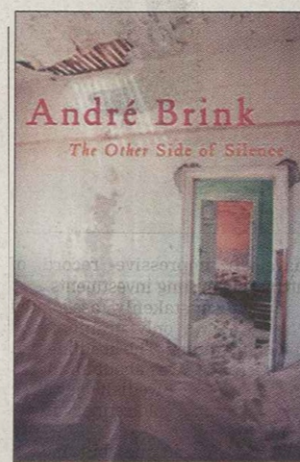
"To report what I know. So that it will not be possible for any man, ever again, to say: I knew nothing about it."

Creating an awareness of injustice was only one part of saying on the contrary, an ability to imagine a different world is the other part. Brink attained both due to his exceptional skill as narrator.

He is often lauded as a master storyteller, his teeming imagination has been compared to Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges and this probably explains his wide readership – in more than



PENSIVE: André Brink appears deep in thought during a briefing on the media bill. PICTURE: BRENTON GEACH



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 storytellers: Ma-Roos in *Chain of Voices*, Rosette in *On the Contrary*, Ouma Kristina in *Imaginings of Sand*, Cupido Cockroach's mother in *Praying Mantis*.

These stories show an awareness of our world as language, as story. It becomes clear that any understanding of the world as it is is only one story.

There are always other possibilities, other stories to tell. Lacking the creativity to imagine different stories leads to violent behaviour, because it causes a defence of that single story, as the old Seer Lermlet realises 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 un-

creative response of patriarchy, traditionalism, nostalgia, nationalism and fundamentalism.

In reaction to the Seer's words, Flip Lochner thinks:

"In spite of my suspicion and resentment, I felt moved by something in the old fucker, perhaps in all his breed."

"With the lies of stories – all the lies, all the stories – we shape ourselves the way the first person was shaped from the dust of the earth."

"That is our first and ultimate dust. Who knows, if we understood what was happening to us, we might not have needed stories in the first place."

"We fabricate yesterdays for ourselves which we can live with, which make the future possible, even if it remains infinitely variable and vulnerable, a whole bloody network of flickerings, an intimate lightning to illuminate the darkness inside." – *Devil's Valley*, 287.

Stories are our ultimate dust and we need them to understand ourselves and the world.

We need these fabrications, but

they should remain infinitely variable. Accepting a single yesterday means that one has to keep stamping it down, forcing it on others.

Philida, like the other storytellers in Brink's novels, is imaginative, and dares to grab Frans's pen.

Frans, like his father and so many patriarchs and administrators in Brink's novels, lacks the imagination to tell a new story, to make a future possible (even when he realises 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 is 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 reimagining the world he made a more human future possible.

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