

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 303P

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa.

ANDRÉ BRINK

In fairness to the book I should point out that I started working on it at least a year before Biko's death. I started writing and started working on it, making notes and so on, and then came the death of Biko, which shattered me so totally in its overwhelming reality that for several months I just felt too sickened to really go on with the book. And in fact I put it aside altogether and finished another novel - Rumours of Rain which I had been toying with. So it was about eight months or so after Biko's death that I really felt that I could now face the situation again, and even then it was such a terrible reality that I felt totally depleted after finishing the book. I've never battled so much with a book in my whole life, because of this violent sense of immediacy and reality.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the well-known South African writer, André Brink, talking about his new book "A Dry White Season", which has incidentally been banned in South Africa.

The book concerns the death in police detention of a young black man, Jonathon Ngubene shortly after the Soweto riots of 1976. The boy's father, Gordon, tries to discover the truth about his son's death, is himself detained, and later dies also in police detention, in the Security Headquarters in John Vorster Square. Well, one man refuses to believe the bland official statements about the deaths of Jonathon and Gordon Ngubene. That man is a white teacher; a moderate, church-going Afrikaner, called Ben du Toit; and the book details his campaign to uncover the truth about the Ngubenes' deaths.

Well, as the book progresses, Ben acquires some allies, a black hustler from Soweto called Stanley, a young white journalist, Melanie Bruwer and Melanie's father, Professor Bruwer, who gives Ben spiritual support as he continues on his moral crusade. However, Ben loses the affection of his family, the support of his friends and colleagues at the school, his job, and finally is himself killed.

Well, as André said earlier, the book certainly has parallels with the deaths of Steve Biko and others. But how about the rest of the book; did he have to invent the details of the rest of the story. Stuart Sutton-Jones put that question to André Brink, when he was in London.

ANDRÉ BRINK

I wish I could say that I had to, but in fact every separate incident as such is based on what actually happened to somebody or other in South Africa. I drew on some of the events surrounding the death of Biko, some of the events surrounding the death of quite a few other black people in detention in South Africa. I tried to obtain every scrap of court material that I could lay my hands on, court records and so on, and for the rest I also drew on what I heard about from friends and acquaintances about what had actually happened to them.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

Now the book seems to be rather ambiguous when looking at the success or failure of the campaign of the hero Ben du Toit, to try and find out the true circumstances of the deaths inside John Vorster Square. I just wonder whether this ambiguity is intentional, whether you believe that an individual can never be wholly successful.

ANDRÉ BRINK

I think it has a lot to do with my whole view of the concept of the hero. I just don't think that in the 20th Century we can expect heroes in the old classical tradition. Traditionally the hero used to be the man who conquered, now to me, the hero is the man who simply succeeds in enduring and bearing witness of what he has seen. So in this sense, I think although Ben du Toit is crushed by the machinery of the state security, of the secret police and so on, and he's physically killed, his testimony remains. And I'd like to link that up with an essay by a French Philosopher which made a tremendous impression on me when I first read it years ago. It deals with a bee, and the crucial passage there is that if you crush a bee in your hand it will sting you before it dies, which in itself is a totally insignificant matter. But if it hadn't been for that there wouldn't be any bees left in the world. So I think in the light of this I see the actions of people who become martyrs for a cause and they in themselves may fail on the personal level but eventually without them, we all would have drowned long ago.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

There is also the question of Ben's success or failure in relation to the blacks within the book, particularly Stanley. They share difficulties because they are both trying to help an ideal form of justice against the state apparatus which is trying to crush them. And yet there is always a sense of the impossibility of getting into the mind and into the heart of another individual no matter how close they are. It seems that Ben failed in that too.

ANDRÉ BRINK

To my mind that is an essential tragedy, first of all of the South African situation today, where institutionalised separation of groups of people on the basis of colour forces people more and more apart, and makes it more and more impossible for people, with however much goodwill they may approach the situation, to simply get through to one another and understand one another's people. But to me this situation

will also illustrate something which I feel may perhaps be true about people generally. It is so difficult, so almost impossible, for one person really to reach out and touch somebody else for more than just a moment. I think that is the sort of underlying philosophy which runs through all my books, that there are some moments of Grace, or Wonder, when people actually stand before each other and discover each other and are close, and those moments are lost and can only be remembered.

ROGER KETZKEMETZ READS EXTRACTS FROM PAGE 144 OF ANDRÉ BRINK'S NEW NOVEL "A DRY WHITE SEASON"

ANDRÉ BRINK

In the South African political situation the apartness of people is forced upon everybody whether they want to or not. However much some among them want to reach out and touch each other, it is almost impossible because you are forced to live in certain areas and to mix with certain people and you are kept out of the lives of others altogether. So you may just as well have existed on different planets altogether.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

There is also a quote in the book which seems to underline the ineffectual nature of the Modern Hero as you see him, and that's when Professor Bruwer says "Never aspire to save the world, your own soul and one or two others are more than enough".

ANDRÉ BRINK

Well, the Professor has a very healthy dose of sound cynicism although he always has a very true appreciation of people and realities. In this particular instance I think he is referring to the ways some people have of always abstracting things, of always thinking in terms of the 'Great Ideology', the great idea, and then missing the immediate interaction with people they come across. So rather than talk about Humanity, the Professor thinks in terms of the few people with whom he actually has intimate and immediate relationships. I think this old man tries to bring the people around him back to the basic facts of human relationships. People you are actually dealing with rather than talking with these vague, and in the final analysis empty terms like Humanity, the Nation, God or whatever.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

These words or terms seem to be also the greatest bar to the success of Ben du Toit's actions, because they are spouted at him by innumerable people, including his own family, to protect themselves against any conscience caused by their own inactivity.

ANDRÉ BRINK

Yes. I think that too. I suppose it goes for many situations all over the world, but specifically in the South African situation from which this book originated, there is this defence mechanism operating almost all the time. Even though people may look at things, they don't really see what they are looking at, because they are scared to acknowledge the impossible reality they may face; and because they don't know what to do about it they fear it. Therefore they pretend it does not exist.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That is certainly true in the scene where Ben du Toit goes to see the Dominee, his local priest, to try to get some guidance and comfort. But he receives little support from the man of god.

ROGER KETZKEFETY READS EXTRACTS FROM PAGES 273 and 274 OF ANDRÉ BRINK'S NEW NOVEL "A DRY WHITE SEASON"

STUART SUTTON-JONES

Do you get the impression that it is the whole nature of state oppression that is being examined here. It is not only the micro-cosm of South Africa, it is the weight of authority against the individual, which would go far beyond the borders of South Africa. Is that the intention of the book, or is it meant to be purely for the South African experience?

ANDRÉ BRINK

Oh no, I really hoped that it would go beyond the limits of the South African experience. Obviously a writer draws, in the first instance, from what he has experienced personally within his own society and so it will be of immediate relevance for South African readers. But I think the basic forces at work here are universal. Everywhere in the world there are individuals who try to battle their way through to a bit of truth, a bit of justice, a bit of liberty and all over the world these people are confronted by the machinery of authoritarianism, in whatever guise this might come to them, to try and crush them. So I think it really deals with an issue that every person all over the world is basically involved in: It deals with the issue not only of an individual and his fight against immediate oppressions, great machinery, great institutions, but also against the mass of very ordinary citizens surrounding him, the indifference of people to suffering, the fact that people feel bewildered when they are confronted with a situation in which it may be required of them to help, and so they rather turn a blind eye and a deaf ear. One has seen that in so many events in Africa; one has seen that in the case of the boat people; one has seen that in Cambodia. It is just a universal part of one's experience. So I would like to think that the book transcends the immediacy of the South African experience.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

South African author André Brink talking to Stuart Sutton-Jones about his new novel "A Dry White Season".

And that's all from 'Arts and Africa' for this week. I hope you can join us again at the same time next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.