

Octogenarian Diary 7



Muthal Naidoo

Ambivalence

*love-hate
fear-faith
angel-devil
eternal struggle
for control
of human soul
from boiling
roiling
mass of gas
life
strife
human being
creator
builder
destroyer*

Octogenarian

Diary 7

Muthal Naidoo

© Muthal Naidoo 2020

ISBN: ***978-0-620-87407-6***

CONTENTS

1. DIARY	4
2. YULETIDE	27
3. <i>Girl, Woman Other</i>	32
4. TRANSGENDER	39
5. BOSTON LEGAL	50
6. SHARMINI BROOKES	52
7. DANISH TV	63
8. THE BELIEVER	72
9. WHAT I GAINED FROM APARTHEID	80
10. STORIES	88
<i>The Lodger</i>	89
<i>Gridlock</i>	99

UBUNTU

a person
is
a person
through
other persons
coming together
in common endeavor
growing the mind
exploring to find
the never ending
flowering of life
in reverence
of interdependence
giving and receiving
love

17 December 2019: FREEDOM

“The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.”

[John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859);

David Spitz, ed. (1975), chapter 1, p. 14]

As individuals, our personal freedom is circumscribed by living in community, but without community we cannot be individuals or free. And to enjoy the benefits of living in an orderly society, it is necessary for all individuals to contribute to that order. Freedom, therefore, is not licence; it entails responsibility.

Like everything human, the concept of freedom, which allows for choice, but a controlled choice, is ambivalent. It exemplifies the paradoxical nature of human existence which arises from human duality as an individual and a member of society. One cannot be human outside of society but living in society requires conformity to its dictates i.e. a reduction of individual freedom. Freedom, therefore, is conditional and can never be absolute..

18 December 2019:

Last night, I watched an episode from the *Judge John Deed* series, which examined the notion of freedom as licence, i.e. the freedom to act without responsibility. Three men take the law into their own hands and execute someone who has betrayed them. They are arrested and brought to trial. Though they may have had just cause, they did not have the right of retribution. That belongs to

society, as represented by the justice system.

As the series is set in the courtroom of a judge, in every episode we see individuals being indicted for breach of the law. And the judge himself is a fallible human being, something of a Don Juan, who feels impelled to sleep with every attractive woman he encounters. As he, a designated protector of human values, treats women as sex objects to be exploited, the series illustrates that despite the superstructure of laws that we create to establish and maintain our humanity, we remain animals.

We are thus made aware of the deep irony of the human condition.

freedom
from
bondage
in the bond
to licence,
abandon;

freedom
from being
human

NON-VIOLENCE

In 1908, Leo Tolstoy, advocate of non-violence who inspired Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement, sent "A Letter to a Hindu" to the Editor of *Free Hindustan*, in which he entreated the people of India not to adopt violence in their struggle for freedom. In his letter, he included the following verses from the Tamil *Thirukkural* (*Sacred Verses*).

***Thirukkural* : Chapter 31**

- i. The aim of the sinless one consists in acting without causing sorrow to others, although he could attain to great power by ignoring their feelings.
- ii. The aim of the sinless one lies in not doing evil to those who have done evil unto him.
- iii. If a man causes suffering even to those who hate him without any reason, he will ultimately have grief that will not be overcome.
- iv. The punishment of evil-doers consists in making them feel ashamed of themselves by doing them a great kindness.
- v. Of what use is superior knowledge in the one, if he does not endeavour to relieve his neighbour's want as much as his own?
- vi. If, in the morning, a man wishes to do evil to another, in the evening the evil will return to him.

This quotation from the *Thirukkural* propounds the view that violent retaliation is not the answer to violence. To return violence with violence is to adopt the uncivilized behaviour of the attacker and thus to endorse barbarity. A civilized person should be an example of compassionate behaviour; one who allows an attacker to recognize his

own humanity as well as that of his victim.

It is an idealistic view and history, through wars and conflicts, has shown us that it is beyond us.



“திருக்குறள் –

THIRUKKURAL

is the classic Tamil sangam (treatise) on the art of living. Consisting of 133 chapters with 1330 couplets or kurals, it deals with the everyday virtues of an individual. Authored by Valluvar, between the third and first centuries BCE, it is considered one of the greatest works ever written on ethics and morality and is praised for its universality and non-denominational nature.”

VALLUVAR

“The statue of Valluvar, author of the *Thirukkural* on an island in Kanyakumari facing the Tamil Nadu coastline.” (Wikipedia)

19 December 2019: CHRISTMAS/XMAS

Next week, the world will be celebrating Christmas. Is Christmas still a religious holiday or has it become Xmas, simply the evocation of Santa Claus with his bag of goodies? A season for shopkeepers to be jolly?

Back to the Cave

Public Holidays have lost their significance in my life. As a pensioner, my understanding of the word ‘holiday’ is not the same as that of a working person employed in the system. Being a retiree, my existence may be seen as one continuous holiday. But it is not; it is just the opposite. It is a continuing, and even more demanding effort to give real meaning to my existence. Such a need is heightened by the fact that I am a loner.

Being marginal to the system that gave my life an expedient meaning while I was employed in it, I have now to make genuine meaning of my existence. As the system has no use for me, I have to discover an independent reason to be.

No longer recognized as contributing to the system, what is the meaning of my life?

Trying to understand that, has become my *raison d’etre* and I am back to the beginning of time; back to the caveman era when the human animal looked around and found himself with nothing – but opportunity. It gave him the impetus to create his unique existence.

And that is now my focus: creating an understanding of how to be as a hermit in the midst of community.

So I write.

SHELL SHACK

locked
in
mind
blind
to the world;
curled
in
snail whorl

19 December 2019: MIKE AND TAM

Two days ago, I received an email letter from Mike Stainbank, written, in memoriam, to the late Professor Es'kia and Rebecca Mphahlele. The letter explains how Mike's initiative for the creation of The Apartheid Museum (TAM) was snatched from him and an attenuated version established by those who had appropriated it – men who had used the illegitimate power afforded them by a racist system.

When we live under a system such as apartheid, we tend to see life in terms of a dichotomy of good and evil – the powerless as innocent victims; the powerful as exploitative opportunists – such as those who stole Mike's idea for The Apartheid Museum.

Under apartheid, in order to achieve justice, the oppressed believing that “good” (black) had to overcome “evil” (white), came up with slogans such as “Black is

Beautiful”; “Black Power”; and “Gather Afrikans Gather”. And when apartheid, under which good and evil were personified in racial terms, was finally abandoned, people expected to experience real justice. Such an expectation revealed a lack of understanding of the influence of power in human relationships.

Power, which translates as control, gives rise to domination and self-aggrandizement. Revolution does not bring about change in the abuse of power. Revolution simply results in the replacement of one set of *autocrats* of one colour or class, with another set of *autocrats* of another colour or class.

Democracy, like any other form of government, has very little to do with “power to the people” which simply means the vote. And once a person has voted, he has given away his power and democracy becomes autocracy. It is not the *identity* of the governor that is the problem; it is the fact that he has power. “*Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*,” has become a cliché, and we do not take it seriously.

In shouting “Amandla Awethu,” “Power to the People,” “Gather Afrikans Gather,” we express a common delusion: there is no such thing as people power. “Power to the People” simply means the vote, and nothing more; and the vote is the mandate we give to governors to regulate our lives. Our collective vote gives *them* power, absolute power.

If “power to the people” were a reality, Mike would

not, after two decades, still be fighting for acknowledgement of The Apartheid Museum as his original conception. He would have the power to justify his claim.

21 December 2019: MILAN KUNDERA

I have just finished rereading Milan Kundera's novel, *Immortality*, and am going to reread it again. I am also going to reread all his other books, at least as many as I can find.

The following is the abstract of a paper, inspired by Milan Kundera, written in September 2007.

METAPHORIC BEING

The human need for safety and security have given rise to beliefs, theories and social structures that unite us, enable us to cooperate and allow us to rationalize existence through belief in the supernatural and 'absolute' truth. But after Einstein, we can no longer accept truth as absolute and are forced to question our understanding of reality.

As we cannot function in uncertainty in the pragmatic world, we anchor our uncertain existence on absolute principles in all the disciplines that we have created. And what we accept as 'truth' is actually the consensus that we give to the theories that we create to give us stability.

Our truths are expedients that camouflage uncertainty.

In business, according to Milan Kundera, we seized on

uncertainty as opportunity and turned it to profit. Kundera calls businessmen “imagologists”. They employ the power of the image to camouflage uncertainty which they have turned into a sales principle – the need to update; the need for the latest fashion. Fear of the unknown, thus reconstituted, has become a human requirement.

In journalism, uncertainty gave rise to the need to know and turned the journalist into one who searches for apodictic fact and demands transparency in human endeavours. Bureaucracy, however, is not transparent, so journalists, deflected from the official, turn to the personal and demand consistency of action from the individual.

Novelists, on the other hand, focus on uncertainty in order to understand how human beings make sense of their lives in an ever expanding existence. While journalists operate in taken-for-granted given circumstances and question the morality of actions in terms of accepted understandings, novelists examine actions as coping mechanisms. Journalists work with absolutes; novelists with the relative.

And, paradoxically, while novelists search for existential truth through fiction, journalists and the rest of us, conform to the theoretical formulae for living that we have created and do not see them as fiction.

PARADOX

the human creature,
incarcerated
in chaotic collusion
of light and dark
dichotomized
its strength called god
satan, its weakness,
interrogates
the accident of existence
and contrives
meaning for life

29 December 2019

Today being Sunday, I was off to the launderette at eight this morning. As this is the holiday season, only the staff was there, very busy with the laundry of those who simply drop off their loads and leave them to be done.

Back home about an hour later, I picked up Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, and continued reading. I kept falling asleep over it. It may be that I am developing Alzheimer's disease as my memory is beginning to play tricks on me and I am having trouble keeping track of characters and events.

It is becoming difficult for me remember what has gone before and I am forced to go back to rediscover what has led to present events that I am now encountering.

30 December 2019: MY NIECES (SQD)



Dris (Diriscilla) Niece #3 (D)

I received the following email message from niece #3, Diriscilla. It was sent yesterday, but I found it only this morning when I switched on my laptop at 5:30 to start working.

Hi Muthal...are you happy that we come visit you at about 11 or 12.00 tomorrow? 3 of us and Raschin's family? Not mum and dad? We can bring some snacks...I can make some mince samoosas?

I replied that I would be happy to see them. Raschin, is Dris's brother. I have not seen my nephew in years. When I looked on my cellphone, I found I had missed

two calls and two messages from Dris. My deafness is turning me into an anti-social being. As I had not replied promptly, I hoped that my nieces and my nephew and his family had not been put off.

At about noon, Quereshini, niece #2, popped into the flat. I had left the security gate and front door unlocked in anticipation of the visit. Q had probably knocked and, when I hadn't responded, had come in.



Quereshini Niece #2 (Q)

I shut down the computer and went into the sitting room to find Reggie and Suzie, my brother and sister-in-law, Q's parents, walking in. I was surprised. Dris's email had said, "Not mum and dad". But I was very happy to see them.

Soon afterwards, my nephew, Raschin, and his family arrived and Q went down to open the complex security

gate for them. When they came in, we sat down to chat and I found Raschin's teenage son, Matthew, to be a very confident, articulate and engaging young man.

SQD

Sharmini (Niece #1), Quereshini and Dris, [SQD], are positive, vital women. SQD, as teenagers, were left to fend for themselves in London. That could have made or broken them; but their spirit was strong and they became self-assertive, independent women. They were growing up in the burgeoning culture of women's liberation, while we in South Africa were locked in our racial ghettos.

I realize that growing up and being educated in the UK, SQD were no longer simply South African. Their formative years had been spent in a freer, more liberating environment and culture where "“race”" was not as inhibiting a factor as it was here in South Africa.

17 January 2020: Email From Sharmini

"We met an old student of yours on our weekend away in Marico. She was invited by friends of ours with whom we visited our farm. Her name is Petra Mason and she was a student of yours at Woodmead."

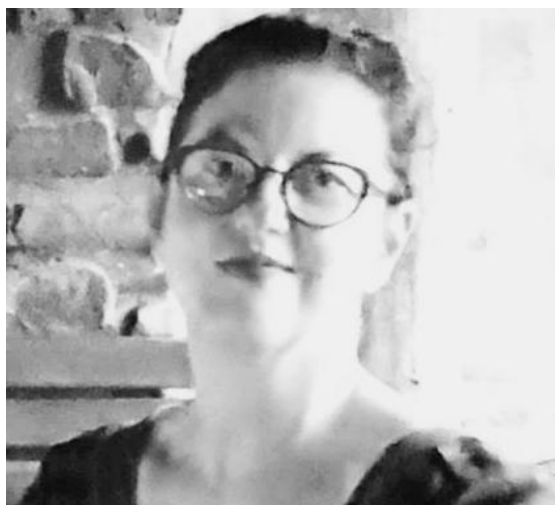
A photo of the group at lunch accompanied the message. In the photo, Petra Mason, with her hand, on her heart, is on the extreme right.

I isolated and enlarged her image to see if it would help me remember – unfortunately it did not.

Too old!



”



Petra Mason

If we do meet, I hope that Petra will be able to forgive me for being senile and forgetful. I am in my eighties and my memory has become unreliable.

It was 36 years ago, 1984-88, that I taught at Woodmead High School.

27 January 2020:

This morning, I found this photo of Reggie and his wife, Suzie, in an email from their daughter, Sharmini.



Sharmini's Caption: Dad yesterday. He needs a small op on urinary tract tomorrow at 2pm. Hopefully, he will be back home by Tuesday but he has been in for a week now and is weary of hospital.

My brother, Reggie, has recently lost a great deal of weight – has become just skin and bone. Being a diabetic, his health has always been a bit of a problem. Fortunately, he has always taken good care of himself. In our family, we are prone to diabetes. Both my parents were diabetics and both my brothers inherited the

condition.

Reggie and his wife, Suzie, like me, are octogenarians, and our birthdays happen to be on three consecutive days in Octo-ber.

1 February 2020: Corky Conquest, my car

My needs are very meagre these days, but I go out to the shops every other day just to keep Corky's battery charged. Yesterday, when I went down into the parking lot, I found I could not open the car door with my remote; I tried with the key, still could not. It hit me that my battery was dead. My lights must have been on all night – again!

This is the second time this has happened in recent months. If I accidentally brush against the light switch, the lights come on so I have to check lights every time I park. I try to remember but I do slip up at times. I obviously did yesterday.

Fortunately my boot lock isn't tied into the alarm system, so I opened the hatch, climbed in, pulled up the lock of a side door, backed out of the boot, opened the door, and unlocked the front doors. Then I went to look for help and found Johannes, the caretaker, who brought jumper cables and his assistant. They referred me to a neighbour across the way who would help. The neighbour, Anita Barthram, parked her car next to mine and the process of charging began, but was hampered by my alarm system which I had to switch off to allow the charging to continue.

After the battery was charged, I took Corky for a long drive. I was most grateful for all the help from caretakers and a very kind and generous neighbour.

7 March 2020: Ditto

It happened again: lights on all night – dead battery. My next door neighbour, Ntsako, came to my rescue this time. I have to find a way to keep that light switch turned off. I will try to lock it in the off-position with sticky tape. I hope that will be sufficient.

I am very fortunate in having very kind neighbours.

3 February 2020: Civilization

This morning, I woke up mulling over the meaning of the word “civilization” in terms of my understanding of the vagaries of human existence, i.e. that we live with fixed rules for living that we so often break.

I looked up “civilization” on the internet and discovered a somewhat apologetic explanation as the word, being concentrated on human achievement, had in the past excluded societies that had not aspired to achievements similar to those of advanced societies.

The meaning of the term civilization has changed several times during its history, and even today it is used in several ways. It is commonly used to describe human societies "with a high level of cultural and technological development", as opposed to what many consider to be less "advanced" societies. This definition, however, is unclear, subjective, and it carries with it assumptions no longer accepted by modern scholarship on how human societies have changed during their long past.

Etymologically, the word civilization relates to the Latin term *civitas*, or "city", which is

why it sometimes refers to urban state-level societies, setting aside the nomadic people who lack a permanent settlement and those who live in settlements that are not considered urban or do not have a state-level organization.

Sometimes it can be used as a label for human societies which have attained a specific degree of complexity.

In a wide sense, civilization often means nearly the same thing as culture or even regional traditions including one or more separate states.

[<https://www.ancient.eu/civilization>]

I have my own much simpler definition of the word that does not depend on achievement; for me it simply means community. I take the word “civilization” to refer to the process of people coming together as a group and devising rules for living together in safety and security.

Groups develop in different ways according to their needs, relationship to the environment, challenges they face, and the intellectual stimulation of being in community. It is not realistic to view such development as equal, simply for the purpose of not giving offense.

Where life is easier, the challenge to humans may not be great. Where life is harder, the challenge being greater, may lead to deep intellectual stimulation. Societies, therefore, develop in different ways. In the modern world, travel and the sharing of knowledge, is turning what was once a world of disparate communities and cultures, into a world of shared cultures and knowledge. We are moving towards global democracy and a common culture.

This is a digression from my original intent which was simply to observe that despite our achievements, we still remain filled with fear, hate and distrust—ready for violence. Every nation has a military institution, every village a police force and a jail. No matter how great our progress, we retain the primitive instincts of our animal natures.

So the word “civilization” cannot simply be taken as refinement. Fear of contamination, which arises from difference, leads to misunderstandings and to primitive aggression – even in the most advanced societies.

CONVENTION

fence
against
inconsistency
cage
of conformity:
to contain
in vain
human volatility;
separate
good from evil
god from devil
and eliminate
human equivocality;
define
and confine
the mystery of existence
in human ambivalence

9 January 2020: My Name

Being of Indian descent, I have an Indian name but I am not an Indian. I was born, brought up and live in South Africa; that makes me South African. And I will not allow anyone to Anglicize my Indian name, a practice that arose from colonization.

When I was a child, a neighbor once called me “Molly”. I was disgusted and being the rude child I was, indignantly corrected her. As an adult, I know clearly why I object but I have no idea why, as a child, I reacted as I did. It was instinctive repudiation of a false identity.

My name, Muthal, means pearl, but when mispronounced, and I am called *mootarl* instead of *mootharl* by those who are not of Tamil or Telugu origin, its meaning changes. When the “h” is left out, I am being called an idiot. I do, however, accept that I am both a pearl and an idiot; it exemplifies my belief in the ambivalence of human nature and existence.

13 January 2020: Exercise

I went on an early morning walk, today. The walk was routine until I gave it up last year after I developed severe pain in my right leg. I have no idea what that was about. Today I decided that as I am not getting any exercise, I need to start walking again. So I set off at about six, and walked – a shorter distance than I used to.

Glad I made the effort.

16 January 2020: Diary VI

I drove to Minuteman Printers in Midrand to pick up copies of my latest book, *Octogenarian Diary VI* and copies of *Octogenarian Diary* for Marsha Cann, which

now has the cover of *Octogenarian Diary V*, but the contents of the first book titled *Octogenarian Diary*, in which I referred to Marsha's visit to South Africa. Marsha and I were friends when I lived in the States in the 1960s and '70s

The printers are having a hard time with the titles of these diaries as they are similar with minor differences. Even though I sent them a pdf of the correct cover, they still printed the wrong one for Marsha's copies. So now I have changed the colour of the covers to try to solve the problem. I hope it works.

11 January 2020: When I Die

As an octogenarian, I live with the consciousness that my existence is nearing its end. And when I die, there will not be a funeral. I see funerals and the paying of respect to a corpse that cannot appreciate any of it, as unnecessary. And graveyards are wasted space that could more usefully be employed by the living.

To want to be remembered is an egotistical desire. People who are loved will be remembered by those who loved them. There is no need for a headstone and a grave.

When I die, there will be no funeral. In death, I will be nothing and in the Indian custom, my body will be cremated.

I hope that no one will foist the convention of a funeral on my corpse – which will not be able to appreciate the “honour”. When I die, my body is to be cremated with no one present and no ashes collected afterwards. I don't believe in paying respect to a corpse; respect is for the living who can appreciate it.

And no one need mourn. Everyone has to go at some time or other and as I am 84, those who know me, are probably waiting for me to expire.

As I do not believe in life after death, I can be disposed of without ceremony.

DEATH

FULL STOP
not colon
no passing on
to heaven
or to hell –
THE END.

Immortality
only in legacy:
Shakespeare's poetry
Hitler's bigotry.

Eulogies, funerals –
rituals
for the living,
are nothing
to the dead

YULETIDE

each day
 is
 a birth day
 a gift of life
 a day
 to celebrate
 a miracle!
 an *atom*
 in
 the Cosmos
 that lives
 breathes
 and loves

25 December 2019: Just Another Holiday

Today is Christmas Day. This holiday has certainly lost its special significance. Perhaps its earlier importance was simply the heritage of a colonial past that lost its meaning with independence.

In the 1940s, I was a child living in the Asiatic Bazaar, a tiny location for people of Indian descent in Pretoria. Even though it was not a Christian community, Christmas was a very visible, special occasion. People put up decorations, paraded in new clothes, sent each other cards, gave each other presents and cooked special dinners.

Now, it is simply a taken for granted holiday with no special significance. I have not heard a single Christmas carol this year.

Coffee

It has been extremely hot this December, so milk does not keep well, not even in the 'fridge. When I made myself a cup of coffee and poured in the milk, it turned sour. In the old days, that would have meant having to forego my morning coffee as all shops, being Christmas Day, would have been closed. But in the twenty-first century – Christmas having become Xmas – there are shops open.

X stands for the unknown, a mystery.

At eight, I got into the car, drove off to get milk and was surprised to find the small shopping centre, on the next street, completely gated and inaccessible. Have its managers solved the mystery?

Replaced the X with Christ?

I drove down to the next shopping centre, a little further down the road, found cars parked close to the PNP with people milling about outside. Clearly, the X remains in place here. After a few minutes, the supermarket opened, I went in, got the milk and returned home for my morning cup of coffee.

When I was little, I couldn't stand coffee and didn't drink it for most of my life. But now, I have become a morning-cup-of-coffee-addict. I do not, however, drink it in the way connoisseurs do, as prescribed in novels – percolated, strong and black.

Mine is instant, sweet and milky.

I live life my way; outside fashion, custom and conformity.

26 December 2019: Boxing Day

This day used to be called Boxing Day but after the overthrow of the apartheid regime, it was changed to Day of Goodwill – not such a blatant reference to patronage of those who serve. Now it is a day for us all to treat one another with kindness and consideration.

But our conditioning under apartheid, remains in place and will only completely disappear once we no longer see one another in terms of “race”; once we accept ethnicity simply as a human characteristic, like being short or tall; once we stop identifying as European, Coloured, African and Indian. We are all South Africans.

I looked up Boxing Day and found the following on the Internet:

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the earliest attestations from Britain in the 1830s, defining it as "the first weekday after Christmas day, observed as a holiday on which postmen, errand boys, and servants of various kinds expect to receive a Christmas box".^[3]

In Britain, it was a custom for tradesmen to collect "Christmas boxes" of money or presents on the first weekday after Christmas as thanks for good service throughout the year.^[5]

In South Africa as recently as the 1980s, vendors who normally had little interaction with those they served were accustomed to knock on their doors asking for a "Christmas box", being a small cash donation, in the weeks before or after Christmas.(Wikipedia)

I see that my little donations at Christmas time to those who service this complex in which I live, is a custom that keeps the class system in place.

Class, which arises from human disparity, can never be eradicated. Humans have different capabilities so there will always be leaders, followers and class systems. Furthermore, we are all always striving to advance, and advancement means gaining status and power over others. Equality, therefore, simply means fairness in the treatment of every individual. It does not mean human beings are equal – only that they have equal opportunity.

But even that is a fallacy. How can people unequally endowed, have equal opportunity?

31 December 2019

This is the last day of the year 2019. Tomorrow we begin a new year and a new decade. We invented the calendar and the clock to regulate our activities and give us structures within which to plan our progress through life.

As a retiree, I live with a reduced sense of structured time. Like a cave woman, I am ruled mainly by day and night, and changes in the seasons. Clocks and calendars have little meaning for me. Every day is a holiday. Tomorrow, whatever it is called, will simply be another day in my life.

2 January 2020: Yule Tide – Passé?

Yesterday, New Year's Day brought the festive season to an end. It used to be a time of great celebration but now, it is just a holiday period – time off from work.

Perhaps only to me as I live alone and have no idea of

other people's activities. The only indication I have had that we are into a New Year, was a feeble attempt by someone in the next row of flats to set off crackers at midnight on the last day of 2019. I heard a little splutter for a second – and that was it! It was not followed by a joyous explosion of sound and spray of sparks – as in the old days.

New Years' Day, like Xmas, has lost its significance as a day of joyful celebration and has become just another public holiday, no big deal. It used to mean expectation of new and exciting opportunities. Now it is just a day off work – except, of course, for shopkeepers.

LIFE

to be
is
to quest
to wrest
from infinity
present reality
the meaning
in the instance
of a spark
of existence

GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER

21 December 2019:

Tom has been supplying me with prize winning novels for several years. Four days ago, he brought me this year's Booker Prize winning novel: Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. Yesterday I received the following email from him:

Have you started reading *Girl, Woman, Other*? I am enthralled with it. I found "Carole" particularly good. It has made me want to start writing! Then, "Megan/Morgan" was especially informative... I find the quality of writing uniformly good.

So I put aside Kundera's *Immortality*, consulted the Internet and found the following:

Bernardine Evaristo was born the fourth of eight children, in Woolwich, south east London, to an English mother (of English, Irish and German heritage) and a Nigerian father (of Nigerian and Brazilian heritage). Her father was a welder and local Labour councillor; her mother was a schoolteacher. She was educated at Eltham Hill Girls' Grammar School, the Rose Bruford College of Speech & Drama, and Goldsmiths, University of London, where she earned her PhD (Creative Writing). She spent her teenage years at Greenwich Young People's Theatre, which was where she first became involved in the arts. [Bernardine Evaristo Blog at Word Press.com.]



BERNARDINE EVARISTO

“Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University, London and Vice Chair of the Royal Society of Literature. She was made an MBE in 2009.”

Bernadine Evaristo writes in an original style that dispenses with punctuation and blocked paragraphing; the blurb on the cover calls it verse fiction. It is a rejection of the traditional structure of written prose for a form that is freer and not simply the traditional neutral, abstract vehicle for content. It is the colloquial voice of a local narrator.

I began by reading the episode that enthralled Tom. It describes the rise of Carole from an impoverished background to that of Vice President of a Company. Her story is based on the rags to riches formula with a racial twist; it depicts the rise of a black female in a white male

corporate environment.

23 December 2019

Bernardine Evaristo, winner of this year's Booker Prize for literature, is the daughter of a British mother and a Brazilian-Nigerian father who became a British citizen. Her book is set in the British cultural environment into which she was born and in which she lives. And the characters in her book, also of British-African descent, are caught between racist intolerance and the determination to survive with dignity as British Citizens.

They are a new generation of Britons but being of mixed parentage, their appearance sets them apart. Though they are British and live in the same environment, under the same government as other Britons, they are subject to "race" prejudice.

The adoption of the language of their new homeland is the clearest indication that they are British. Language is not simply a means of communication; it is also a transmitter of cultural values and ways of living. Through language, immigrants are inculcated into the norms and values of the culture of their new homeland. Even resistance and revolutionary attitudes, that they may adopt, are assimilated from the new language and culture.

Evaristo's characters, new Britons, live in the midst of racial resentment and are forced into an assertion of independence.

In Evaristo's innovative prose-poetic form, I see her creativity as having, in part, emerged from a need to repudiate colonizing cultural norms. She dispenses with punctuation and sets out words, clauses and phrases

separately on succeeding lines as in poetry. It is a declaration of freedom that demonstrates independence as well as creative originality.

26 December 2019: I went back to Evaristo's novel to read the section "*Megan/Morgan*" that Tom described as "especially informative." It goes beyond a mere description of events as Evaristo not only describes, but also analyses, the complexities of human existence. In "*Megan/Morgan*," she questions conventional notions of identity and presents us with a new form that is genderless.

In experimenting with ways in which to present the reality of existence, modern novels no longer depend on a storyline that describes the progress of a character or characters through a given set of problematic circumstances that leads to a solution and affirms conformity to conventional values. Writers are no longer streamlining events to give us a logically progressive set of experiences that culminate in a happy ending.

The modern novel takes on a kind of biographical format which is not dependent on a storyline but on day-to-day happenings in the lives of various characters and resembles non-fiction in presenting the volatility of living experience. The novelist is freeing herself of literary convention in the same way that human beings are freeing themselves of perfunctory understandings of social relations, conventions and gender identities.

28 December 2019

As I am watching episodes of *Boston Legal* in between

reading chapters of *Girl, Woman, Other*, I see a similarity in the structure of the novel to a TV series. It is similarly divided into episodes, each dealing with a specific female character, who is marginally connected to the titular characters of other episodes; all are from the same milieu.

1 January 2020

Girl, Woman, Other, a book of stories of twelve different women, is set in England, and describes the experiences of women who are UK citizens, but in part, of African descent. As their appearance is different, they wear the aura of being foreign, and that somewhat circumscribes their freedom in their home country, the UK.

They experience the culture in which they were born and brought up, i.e. *their own culture*, as socially restrictive, but not intellectually vitiating as was our home grown variety of prejudice in South Africa. In the UK, it was possible for immigrants of mixed or other origin to develop a more positive sense of self.

Prejudice is really fear of difference; a primitive fear that has nothing to do with reality. Difference turns people into aggressive, feral beings – racists. As a racist sees a black person as a virus, he fears contamination and turns himself into a “pesticide” forcing a black person to turn himself into a “mask” that depletes his self-respect.

But prejudice in Britain is not official policy as it was in South Africa. The systems in the UK do not legally discriminate against black people, so growing up in that culture, black people have access to a liberal and progressive way of life. They have the freedom to

develop and advance with greater confidence in themselves than black people living under apartheid.

In South Africa, black people were imprisoned in group areas and systems of differentiated education that inculcated feelings of difference, inferiority and hostility and restricted access to opportunities for progress.

Though life may not have been easy for black immigrants in Britain, it nevertheless offered equal opportunity. Racial restrictions there, being chiefly at personal and social levels, did not inhibit intellectual and artistic development.

Evaristo, 2019 winner of the Booker Prize, describes that life in her prize winning book, *Girl, Woman, Other*. Her emphasis is not on racial prejudice, but on women's liberation, so her characters are not bound by traditional norms and conventions. Marriage is shown to be unnecessary and bearing children not an essential function simply a matter of personal preference. The principal character, Amma, who makes a conscious decision to have a child, chooses a gay man for the father – illustrating that living together in “holy matrimony” as a family, is irrelevant, not a consideration at all to a liberated woman and is even to be avoided.

“we should celebrate that many more women are reconfiguring feminism and that grassroots activism is spreading like wild fire and millions of women are waking up to the possibility of taking ownership of our world as fully-entitled human beings.” (*Girl, Woman, Other*, p. 438)

Liberated Woman

out of the tomb
of the womb
liberated
from home
not wife
or mother –
Other!

released
from the prison
of the oldest
profession
into the world
of power

Free
at last
to be,
at last!

TRANSGENDER

3 January: Keeping Me Informed

Dris and Sharmini, my nieces, came to visit and in the midst of an interesting conversation that Sharmini began about the transgender phenomenon, my hearing aid battery spluttered to an end and I could barely make out what was being said.

As I had not heard of the transgender phenomenon before, I wanted to know what it was about. So I emailed Sharmini afterwards. From her emails, I learned that it is the latest fad in the UK and refers to the ability to change one's gender.

That gave me a new understanding of Bernardine Evaristo's Booker Prize winning novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*. I could now see in it the influence of the transgender movement. In her examination of the modern woman's attitudes to sex, gender and identity, she presents traditional notions of gender and the family as stereotyping. And in her novel, she reduces the male to a sperm donor; he is no longer a husband.

I am learning from the articles that Sharmini has sent me, that people in the Western world now feel the need to actually, physically, change their sexual identities; not simply by external means – dress, make-up, hairstyles – but also by altering their bodies. They now undergo medical procedures to change their sex to suit their gender preference!

What is meant by *transgender* is the *physical* alteration of the body to accommodate one born as male or female but is psychologically of the opposite sex.

5 January 2020:Email from Sharmini

Hi Aunty Muthal,

The issue about transgenderism raised on a BBC World News Report recently was that too many people rush into the procedure without properly understanding why they are doing it. Many people have regretted proceeding with operation and reverse-transgenderism is gaining ground.

The point made by psychologists is that what may appear as symptoms of gender, may in fact be related to other feelings of inadequacy or even to mental disorders that have nothing to do with gender. One transgender victim related her story of childhood abuse that made her hate her body and when she spoke to a psychologist he immediately diagnosed the problem as one of gender and immediately put her on testosterone followed by a physical operation. In fact it did nothing to change her feelings of disgust with her body as that was due to psychological trauma suffered in childhood. She is now in the process of reversal but is very mentally disturbed by the whole process.

One of the female psychologists interviewed narrated her own story of wanting to be a boy as a young girl and looking down on girls who were called 'tomboys' as she felt they were not the real thing. However, as she grew older those feelings dissipated and she is now happily married with children and can laugh at her younger self.

However, she says that if she was that young girl in today's politically correct climate she would have been persuaded to transgender.

Today's PC climate (i.e. a climate that is afraid to critically debate transgenderism for fear of being vilified by the transgender activist community) does no favours to individuals whose problems are more complex than simply being viewed through the gender lens.

Sharmini

6 January 2020: So gay and women's liberation have not only challenged conventional traditions of marriage, they have now given rise to transgenderism. People are now actually going through medical procedures to change their gender. Thank goodness, people in South Africa are not that "advanced".

As I have lost confidence in doctors, what Sharmini indicates of some doctors, opportunistically playing into the new "transgender fad", confirms my view of doctors as crass capitalists. The transgender craze allows them to benefit twice; first they change the gender of a misguided youngster; then they restore the original gender when the change is recognized as a whim. One has to wonder what such interference with the body does to a person's ability to live a normal life.

8 January 2020

This morning, I sent the following message to Sharmini: "Thanks for all the material on the transgender issue. Being conventional, I find it amusing. Has the trans

craze hit South Africa? As a loner, I have no idea of what's going on in the world.”

Sharmini's reply: Not yet in SA but they usually follow suit sometime behind the rest of the world. It sounds amusing but it has had dire consequences with professionals in academia and the medical professions being sacked for refusing to accept that sex is defined at birth even if someone wants to identify as a different gender. It has serious consequences for women who do not want to share the same space as a man who simply defines himself as a woman.

Next, I received from Sharmini, reference to Internet articles on transgender. I looked them up and copied some here.

FEMINISM FREESPEECH POLITICS

SPIKED

Is the tide beginning to turn on trans lunacy?

This year, there has been some much-needed pushback against the trans orthodoxy.

JOANNA WILLIAMS

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

28th December 2019

2019 may, with luck, go down as the year when the tide began to turn against the bizarre worldview of transgender activists. In the run-up to the General Election, Jo Swinson found herself flummoxed by the question ‘What is a woman?’ Days later, she was unceremoniously dumped by voters. Meanwhile, the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, was busy introducing himself to the crowd at the Pink News Awards: ‘My name is

Jeremy Corbyn, pronouns he/him.’ That was met by a big fat ‘no’ from the electorate, too.

Despite this recent pushback, 2019 has also shown what happens when senior members of the medical, educational and legal professions not only succumb to the demands of trans activists, but use transgender ideology to shore up their own moral authority.

The victims are children.

Figures released this year revealed a huge increase in the number of children seeking medical help over concerns with their gender. The number of 13-year-olds referred to the NHS’s gender-identity service rose by 30 per cent on the previous year, while the number of 11-year-olds was up by 28 per cent. The youngest patients were just three years old. Three-quarters of all children seeking help to change their gender, are girls.

Gender self-identification – that is, treating someone who simply says they are female as if they are female – has also had a disastrous impact on the lives of many women. One in 50 prisoners – 1,500 inmates – now identifies as transgender. This is massively more than the number in the general population. Transgender prisoners not only get perks, such as being able to shower alone or have their own cell – crucially, they can also apply to switch between male and female jails. One woman prisoner – assaulted by a transgender inmate while incarcerated in the same institution – is now taking the government to court over this policy.

Women's sport has also suffered from acquiescence to the demands of trans activists. Maxine Blythin became Kent's first trans-woman cricketer. Maxine had a batting average of 15 when playing on the men's team, but averages 124 playing in the women's team. Kelly Morgan has had similar success playing for a Welsh women's rugby team. Concern has been expressed that, despite taking drugs to artificially lower his testosterone levels,

Kelly's superior physical strength could inadvertently injure his female opponents.

Underpinning all of this is a sense that women – adult human females – and their concerns are being quietly erased from public life at the behest of transgender activists. Fear of being labelled transphobic seems to override every other concern – including, for businesses, making money. One tweet was all it took for Flora margarine to pull its advertising from the popular parenting site, Mumsnet. Always, the manufacturer of sanitary pads, removed the female symbol from its packaging.

PODCAST

2019: the year the people struck back

SPIKED

Tragically, women are still prevented from freely discussing the impact of gender self-identification upon their lives. In universities, debates and conferences have been shut down following threats from transgender activists. Gender-critical professors have spoken out about the threats and abuse they have received for raising concerns that sex is being conflated with gender.

Posie Parker, a women's rights activist and leading critic of the transgender movement, was permanently banned from Facebook. The social-media giant cited 'safety and security reasons' for kicking her off the platform and, in the process, denying thousands of people an opportunity to discuss Posie's views.

Worse still, trans-sceptical tweets can now cost you your job. Earlier this month, an employment judge ruled that a charitable organisation was well within its rights to sack Maya Forstater, a tax expert, because she tweeted that transgender women cannot change their biological sex. Her opinions were deemed to be 'absolutist' and not protected in law. When author JK Rowling defended Forstater on Twitter, she was viciously attacked.

The police have got in on the act, too. In October, police in Oxford treated the appearance of stickers – stating 'Woman: noun. Adult human female' and 'Women don't have penises' – as a serious crime. Thames Valley Police appealed for witnesses and announced that those responsible could be charged with a public-order offence.

Elsewhere, a man was quizzed by police for half-an-hour after merely 'liking' a tweet deemed to be offensive to transgender people.

The deputy chief constable of Cheshire police, Julie Cooke, took to Twitter to warn about the dangers of misgendering on 'Pronouns Day'.

Knife crime, meanwhile, hit a five-year high. Yet, despite all the attempts to curtail debate, common sense has – on occasion – won out in 2019. Two major BBC programmes, **Newsnight** and Radio 4's **File on 4**, reported on the experiences of people who detransition, as well as raising serious questions about the treatment of children who question their gender identity and the dangers of doctors prescribing puberty-blocker hormones.

Parents raised concerns about changes to school sex and relationships classes that will mean very young children are taught that gender is how they think and feel. To challenge this, author Rachel Rooney has written an excellent book, **My Body is Me**, which aims to teach children to be comfortable with their bodies as they are, rather than looking to change their bodies to bring them in line with their brains. Inevitably, this benign message has been labelled 'anti-trans extremism'. Elsewhere, the High Court ruled that a woman who gave birth **could not be named as the father** on her child's birth certificate despite having transitioned to a man post-partum.

In 2020, we need to hold police chiefs, medical professionals, MPs and education policymakers to account for the impact of decisions they make around gender. They must not be allowed to hide behind the moral shield of the over-exposed voice of the transgender community. Thankfully, as the election showed, those unable to define what makes someone a man or a woman, or who feel the need to declare their pronouns in public, are seriously out of kilter

with the rest of society. Let's hope we hear a lot less from them next year.

JOANNA WILLIAMS

Associate editor at **spiked**. She is the director of the new think tank, Cieo. (Cieo means arouse, put in motion)

Now I see where Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, is coming from – awareness of the transgender movement.

I am glad I live in the Third World where such issues are not issues; where we are old-fashioned, accept who we are as male or female; where children are not conflicted about their identities as they are not exposed to transgender fantasies. In South Africa, children, in general, take their identities as male or female for granted.

This does not mean that the society is necessarily heterosexual; there are homosexual communities as well. But men are still physically men and women are still physically, women – whether they are gay or not.

But I have to admit that as I live a very secluded existence and not having been aware of the transgender phenomenon, I do not really know whether it has had any influence on South Africans. Furthermore, as a consequence of apartheid, these new trends from Europe and America, have different degrees of influence on the various “race” groups in South Africa. They have the greatest impact on the white population.

Reading about transgender, it occurs to me that it could lead to a new holocaust; a new way to wipe out the human “race”. If men become womb-less women and women, semen-less men, where will babies come from?

20 February 2020

Tom came to visit and I asked him about transgender. As the subject is very new to me, I assumed it would be new to him as well. I was wrong; it is new only to me.

Tom sees transgender as the democratic right of a person who wishes to change his or her gender. There are children as young as three, who repudiate the bodies into which they were born, and it is cruel to ignore the suffering that they endure as a result. Tom made it clear that it is more painful for a person to remain in a body that s/he repudiates than to have a sex change operation.

I realize I am plain ignorant. I freely admit I have very little understanding of the issue. After Tom’s visit, I see that I am completely out of my depth. I do not understand the trauma that leads to the rejection of one’s body. I am aware that there have always been transvestites in society. They have always been ridiculed and perhaps this is now their liberation.

KARMA

action
poised between
good and evil
ambivalence
of human existence
the dance of life

BOSTON LEGAL.

23 December 2019

Being a pensioner and a loner, I have plenty of time to read and to watch videos. So I have been reading *Girl, Woman, Other*, and watching *Boston Legal* in between.

Though *Boston Legal* is set in legal environs that demand strict adherence to the letter of the law, we are shown that such a demand is not always realistic; it does, on occasion, become necessary to work around the law in order to achieve real justice. The main character, Alan Shore, a lawyer, boldly gives people real help when legal restrictions keep them locked in injustice.

We are thus made to realize that the systems we create to regulate our lives are not perfect and cannot cater for all eventualities. Even when we observe strict adherence to the law, we may still be wrong.

Boston Legal reflects a modern understanding of the vicissitudes of living in the world. Sex and humour give the series popular appeal and commercial viability, but for me, its appeal lies in its probing, through legal as well as extra-legal analysis, of the viability of human constructs for living. And we discover that as the laws we formulate for civilized living cannot encompass every eventuality, they can and do on occasion become inhumane restrictions.

As laws are based on human constructs that arise from lived experience, they cannot reflect the unforeseeable. Human beings are ever evolving and the

fixed laws and customs that we create, cannot accommodate new understandings that arise from changing circumstances. Laws, therefore, can and do become outdated and oppressive.

27 December 2019:

In the series, we are also made aware of the vagaries of the human condition through the unconventionality of its main characters. So the series is not without humour.

The following quote is from a conversation between Catherine, Alan Shore's Secretary, and Bernie, her boyfriend. Bernie has killed two women – his mother and a neighbor and Catherine, as a Christian, wants to help him.

Catherine: All I'm saying is, if you killed two people and if you're alone as you say, there couldn't be a better time for you to turn to Jesus Christ, your saviour.

Bernie: Under normal circumstances, I'd agree

Catherine: But...

Bernie: I'm Jewish

Catherine: (*shocked*) Bernie, there has never been a Jewish serial killer...

Bernie: Son of Sam, David Berkowitz!

Catherine: He was adopted. Genetically, he's one of ours.

Bernie: Well, what are you saying?

Catherine: I am saying that if you're out there murdering people – on some level, you must want to be Christian. Would you let me take you to church?

4 January 2020

Sex is conventionally male-female in *Boston Legal*. The series must have been created before sexual identity had progressed to transgender.

Even so, I was made to see that sex and love are two separate states. Sex is shown as appetite, not love. The only real love in the show is the love of Denny and Alan for each other. Their relationship is one of true regard, and is not based on sex but on affinity and fondness. All their sexploits with women are responses to physical needs and have no connection with love.

As Denny puts it: “I’ll take a friend over a wife any-time.”

True love is not being equated with sexual congress – only with spiritual compatibility. That comes across in Evaristo’s novel as well.

Romantic love, in the modern world, is simply a fanciful notion; a euphemism to cover a physical urge.

DESTINY

the road
you construct
into the future
you create
you
are
your
karma

6.

**SHARMINI BROOKES
THE WRITER**



Sharmini Brookes

27 November 2019: Poem from Sharmini

The Bush Felt...

Warm and moist on my skin
After the rains had softened the red dust
And made the grass look greener
And the earth more red
A lazy sun mopped up the moisture
With large swathes of grey cotton-wool
That needed a good wringing out

The Bush felt so familiar.
That patch of grass over there
Those long untidy clumps...
Just like the grass on Tata's farm.
And those trees, those on the edge –
Don't they remind you of Brookside?

At dusk, the Bush felt beautiful.
The day is the brass section –
Hard and bright and strident,
But the dusk is softer...
The piano without the forte,
An adagio – slowly into the night

The birds return home.
Mothers call their young to the nests.
As the birds sleep, the insects come
to life –
Or maybe we only notice them now

...

Now as the sun goes down
And they rush towards the lamplight
In a dizzy death dance

An acrid smell pervades the air
Cochineal, shellac...ammonium nitrate?
I'm not sure...but it's the smell of burning
Of insect wings and insect bodies
Fluttering too close to the heat.
Frogs croak, cicadas sing and owls hoot.
In the distant hills a baboon barks.

An incessant humming fills the gathering dark –
The background sound of the universe.
The sky is a Harvey Wallbanger
But I prefer my G and T
Out here on the stoep,
Gazing over the veldt, up to the trees
And the Swartruggens beyond –
The black ridge that looks over the Groot Marico,
Because and then, yes... just then,
The Bush felt like home to me.

At Watershed Down
22.12.06

20 January 2020: Theatre Review

EVIL - THE BULLY UNCOVERED

[Auto & General Theatre on the Square., West Street
Sandown Johannesburg Gauteng South Africa]



Jaques de Silva

Jaques De Silva gives a brilliantly taut, one-man performance as the bullied son who becomes the school

bully in a true story by writer Jan Guillou.

Specialising in physical theatre for young people, actor, director and teacher, Jacques de Silva believes that “young people must be given the opportunity and skills to be able to play and express their understanding of the world.”

But this is not a play just for young people. It deals with the subject of ‘bullying’ – an issue that has gained enormous public focus over recent years and a subject that co-director Laine Butler wrote on for her Applied Drama research paper when she majored at Rhodes University in 2016.

The recent tragic deaths of two young boys at two different schools in Johannesburg, raises questions about school culture and possible incidents of bullying.

De Silva plays Erik Ponti, a fourteen-year-old boy so regularly beaten by his sadistic father that his wallpaper is sprayed with little dots of blood. He learns to take the beatings, never crying out or showing his suffering to satisfy his father. He learns to use violence against others to avoid becoming the target himself and discovers that hitting the nose to evoke a nosebleed is a dramatic and useful way to gain the upper hand.

He is not stupid, as bullies are usually portrayed, and is in favour with many teachers while his violent streak forces the school children to fear him. These tactics lead to his becoming the gang leader at his local school and he is soon expelled from every state school in the area for his use of violence to earn money from criminal activities.

He is sent to a boarding school where he is determined to mend his ways and do well but the culture of ‘fagging’ for the seniors, who are allowed to maintain

discipline in the school while the staff look the other way, forces him to resume his violent methods to avoid being pushed around and to defend his chubby, brainy but nerdy roommate.

There are no easy answers in this play. We feel both sympathy and horror for Erik. We are sometimes with him when he suffers at his father's hands and when he stands up to the bullying seniors at boarding school, or when he tries to protect his roommate Pierre, whose 'Gandhian' tactic of protest through non-violence does not work. But we recoil in horror when he describes how he caused his first nose-bleed on an opponent, or when he retaliates with sadistic violence against the other bullies at school and even when, now as a young adult, he returns to take his revenge on his father.

It's a tour-de-force in psychological drama and De Silva has us on the edge of our seats with bated breath until the very end.

Directors Laine Butler and Mike de Silva pared down the set to an iron bedstead, a wooden desk and chair and clever use of lighting that allowed Jacques de Silva to showcase his physical acting ability to the very best.

'Evil' is on at the Auto and General Theatre On The Square. Hurry along and take your teenagers with you. The play is under 2 hours long with no interval.

Sharmini Brookes

Freelance writer

Film Review

1917 - THE VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES

Golden Globe winner for Best Picture and Best Director, Sam Mendes' '1917' puts the audience in the trenches alongside the ordinary British Tommy.

Based on the reminiscences of Mendes' grandfather, famed West Indian writer Alfred H. Mendes and on the

recollections of stories told to Krysty Wilson-Cairns, we experience the horror of WW1 (then termed the war to end all wars) alongside two lowly enlisted officers, Lance Corporals Blake and Schofield as they are ordered to deliver a message across no-man's land and enemy lines to General MacKenzie near the small French town of Écoust in order to stop a planned British attack on supposedly retreating Germans who have been planning this booby trap for months.

Mendes has shot the film to appear as one continuous shoot from start to finish using a technique first seen in Alfred Hitchcock's 'Rope' 1948, where the camera moves behind an object like a tree or wall so that it can be stopped and restarted without the noticeable edit.

This technique immerses the audience in the viewpoint and the emotions of the lead characters as they are startled out of a drowsy nap, barked orders from their senior officers and sent on their way with an anointed blessing of whisky and nonchalantly handed a flare to signal the unlikely event of their safe arrival across no-man's land.

Over a mile of trenches was dug and war-torn villages were painstakingly rebuilt to create an authentic feel and setting. We stumble with them through their own trenches cramped with their tired, listless, sleeping, sick or dying colleagues; across the muddy swamps and cratered hellholes of no-man's land; trampling over dead bodies and getting cut on barbed wire; arriving in enemy trenches that are booby trapped; avoiding bullets from German marksmen; seeing people die in front of them; killing enemy soldiers at close quarters; starving and thirsty; bumping into other demoralized British contingents; taking orders from superiors and giving

orders to the privates (one rank below them).

It's an adrenalin rush with no pause for thought. Shoot or be shot. Kill or be killed. Keep moving because the end is not yet in sight. This is only April 1917. This war has another year and a half before an armistice is signed in November 1918.

Reminiscent of Sebastian Faulks' *'Birdsong'*, Mendes' close up continuous shot shows a reality often missing in the grand narratives of historical textbooks.

Dean Charles Chapman (LC Blake) and George MacKay (LC Schofield) are probably not as well-known as those in the cameo roles of General Erinmore (Colin Firth) and General MacKenzie (Benedict Cumberbatch) but they rehearsed six months for these roles and had us rooting for them all the way.

1917 is a certain contender for the Oscars alongside *'Once Upon A Time in Hollywood'* and *'The Irishman'*.

Sharmini Brookes

Freelance writer

IS WRITING A THRILLING OPTION?

10/20/2011

Deon Meyer, one of South Africa's best-selling crime thriller writers', talks to the largely female fan-club of crime fiction at Novel Books in Bryanston, Johannesburg about his new novel *Trackers* and about the process of writing.

According to Deon Meyer writing is more perspiration than inspiration. All this stuff about waiting for one's muse is nonsense. Writing is hard work; a laborious task that forces him to struggle with every word to find exactly

the right one. The first quarter of the book takes him half the time of the total. This is because each book is a uniquely lived experience and this uniqueness has to be developed at the start.

He starts his day at 7am and likes to work in a confined, dark space so he always chooses the smallest room in the house for his workspace. There must be no distractions; no music, no telephone, no visitors. It takes him at least half an hour to get into the mind-space of his fictionalised world before he can put pen to paper. If there is a distraction, it will take an extra half hour.

Story ideas come from the writing process itself, from reading widely and from aspects of life that fascinate him. In *Thirteen Hours*, the book that won the 2011 Barry Award for best thriller in the USA and was short-listed for the 2011 CWA Dagger Award in the UK, he developed an awareness of how important the role of time was in creating suspense and so he decided to experiment in how few hours one could compress a whole novel.

Meyer doesn't believe he fits any specific categorisation within the crime genre as his books are part mystery, detection and thriller. For him the traditional novel structure is very rigid and follows that of the Greek dramatic structure written in three acts: the introduction, the development of the characters and the resolution. But the crime novel is one big second act. You start with the action, move to the climax and end with a short resolution; hopefully leaving your reader wanting more in terms of character.

Aware of the dictatorship of this structure, he continually wants to challenge himself, to grow as an author and to bend the rules.

In *Trackers*, his latest book, he decided to write three different stories as though they were three completely different books and then bring the whole together in some kind of resolution.

The first story idea was suggested by his brother, a director of the big Transport Company called Golden Arrow in Cape Town, who mentioned the new technology he had installed on all of his trucks; a mirror which tracks the progress of his trucks and saves an image whenever the truck accelerates too quickly. These hundreds of separate images are collected and sent off for collation.

The next morning they are delivered back to him in a format that he can scrutinize. It has saved him millions in identifying staff training needs and in resolving cases of road traffic disputes. In this scenario, Meyer perceived an interesting source of conflict which he says is the mother of suspense; so he is always on the lookout for sources of conflict everywhere he goes and in everything he reads.

The idea for the second story came when he moved from the cosmopolitan and culturally aware Melkbosstrand on the Cape West Coast to the more conservative Afrikaans suburb of Durbanville. His workspace overlooks the outside yard of the grand house of his wealthy Afrikaans neighbours; a successful businessman, his very attractive wife and the obligatory two and half kids. He noticed that she came outside quite often and had a good cry near the washing line. He wondered what could cause such distress to such an attractive woman who seemed to have it all. He began to ponder about whether she may be thinking of escape – of leaving tracks and what would happen if she followed her dream.

The third story was suggested by his reading about the black rhino that are hunted for their horns and wondering why their horns are so valuable. He found he couldn't decide which story he wanted to write so decided to write all three as one book.

Having worked as a journalist he learnt how to do research and to make useful contacts. He has developed close relationships with individuals within the Police Force to help with his research and they read the manuscripts for accuracy before he sends it to the publishers. A motorcycle enthusiast, he rides around the country picking up interesting facts and other useful research material. One has to shut oneself away during the writing process but at every other opportunity one needs to be open to and relating to as many people and as many experiences as possible.

Sometimes he gets so fascinated by his research that it is tempting to put too much of this absorbing detail in and then he has to cut it back and only put in what actually moves the story along.

Ideas for his characters may come from people he meets or sees but on the whole he spends a lot of time creating them, imagining a back story for them so that he can feel how they will react in different circumstances. The more time he spends with them the more real they become and sometimes he is even surprised by how they react.

Writing a book takes about 12 – 18 months and during that time the fictional characters are more real to him than the real world. He chooses names for his

characters from a telephone book. It is important to him that the name is right as he has to get to know this character. He always chooses the surname first and one of his foibles is that the bad person should have a name starting with the letter 'B'.

Meyer speaks fluent English but is in fact an Afrikaans speaker. He writes in Afrikaans and has a translator for the English version. In fact his books have been translated into 29 other languages around the world. He says the subtleties of words are too important to him and he feels more intimate with his mother tongue. When he speaks English, he has to think too much about it because he has to translate it first.

Writing is fun but to do it well is hard work. For Meyer reading as many books in the genre you want to write in is essential. Ed McBain, Robert Harris and Ian Rankin are a few of the many writers that have made an impression on him.

Meyer's books and characters are based in South Africa, a country he still loves and will never consider living anywhere else.

Sharmini Brookes

TWO DANISH TV SERIES
ARVINGERNE and BORGEN

ARVINGERNE
(THE LEGACY)

15 January 2020: I spent most of yesterday watching episodes of *Arvingerne* (*The Legacy*) a Danish TV series created by Maya Ilsøe. Dris dropped off *Arvingerne* and *Borgen* when she came to visit.



Maya Ilsøe

Ilsøe does not confuse sex and passion with love. In *Arvingerne*, there is plenty of sex but, as her characters are drawn together by desire, love comes across as romantic illusion.

The series begins with Veronica's bequest of her home and fortune, just before her death, to her hitherto unknown, illegitimate offspring, Signe. This is the first indication that Signe is given that she was adopted and that leads to conflict with her adoptive mother, whom she had taken for her birthmother.

This is the introduction to cruelty and hatred, the true legacy alongside the bequest of property and riches. There is no romantic nonsense in this series. It dispenses with the idea of love and presents sex as a raw physical need.

Though Signe (Sunshine) the main character in *The Legacy* does her best to become an entrepreneur, she is thwarted at every turn.

First she decides to turn the estate she has inherited into a farm for industrial hemp, but that fails. Then she plans to raise pigs and a woman, a kind of pagan votaress, who has become her guru, shoots the pigs as they have become diseased.

Signe also gives shelter to a bunch of hippies, who are homeless by choice. As they are attempting to turn their unconventional beliefs into a revolution, they contaminate the water supply, and the townspeople turn against Signe for her kindness to the hippies.

And Signe's inability to conceive becomes symbolic of a barren legacy.

In its conclusion, however, *The Legacy* becomes conventional as it moves from realism to romanticism, to give us a happy ending in which bad people become benign; Signe discovers she is pregnant; and all live happily ever after.

Disappointing.

19 January 2020

BORGEN



Adam Price creator of *Borgen*

**Review of *Borgen* by Jace Jacob
Buzz Feed News Entertainment Director
(18, 2013, at 11:00 a.m.)**

I've been passionately shouting at the top of my lungs about Danish political drama *Borgen* for the last year and a half. The groundbreaking and riveting show— which returns for a third season next month in the U.S. on LinkTV (and in Los Angeles on former PBS station and online —

feels as if the best parts of *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom* were put in a blender and puréed... before being transformed into a gorgeously stylized haute cuisine dish. It is a staggering work of sophisticated beauty and dazzling intelligence.

Created by Adam Price, the superlative *Borgen* is often grouped together with its Nordic Noir kin — *Forbrydelsen*, which went on to be remade by AMC into *The Killing*, and *Broen*, which was adapted by FX as *The Bridge* — but the show doesn't fit into the dark, dreary, and often depressing Nordic Noir category.

For one thing, *Borgen* represents a rare streak of optimism and hope that isn't typically seen in Scandinavian drama, which tends to revel in its almost all-consuming nihilism and darkness.

Borgen (which is often translated as "Government," but actually means "The Castle," a nickname for Christiansborg Palace, the seat of Parliament, the office of the prime minister, and the Danish Supreme Court) is gut-wrenching in its own way.

Jace Jacob



**Sidse Babett Knudsen as Birgitte Nyborg,
The Prime Minister in *Borgen*.**

**Birgitte
Hjort
Sorensen**

**(Katrine
Fønsmark
in *Borgen*)**



Borgen's popular appeal also depends on its scenes of sex and nudity. Sex flourishes alongside the wheeling and dealing of politicians.

The main characters in the series are women: Birgitte Nyborg, the Prime Minister, and Katrine Fønsmark, a newspaper and TV journalist. Does society become more humane as a result of gender equality? If it does not, does it mean that women have not really been liberated but have simply been co-opted into male-dom?

Nyborg and Fønsmark are powerful people, and, as they are women, there is a slight modification of the blatant exercise of power. But Jace Lacob's review does not credit the influence of women's liberation with the "streak of optimism and hope that isn't typically seen in Scandinavian drama". The two main characters in the show are women. As women, they retain their compassion but the show depicts this chiefly in presenting them as loving, caring mothers and not in their positions of power in society,

24 January 2020: Gender Roles

In *Borgen*, women, no longer merely sex objects, are not subject to taken-for-granted notions of marriage and motherhood. Furthermore, being people with power, they initiate sexual encounters.

In the modern world, women are not limited by their biology; having been liberated by notions of gender equality and the invention of contraceptives, they are no longer second-class citizens. They claim equal status and opportunity and compete for power with men; and like men, relegate romance and marriage to the background.

Marriage and children are no longer primary objectives. And with the option of divorce, the ideal of “till death us do part” has no relevance.

But motherhood cannot be avoided – children have a habit of resulting from sex – and there is plenty of sex in *Borgen*. Though women can escape marriage, they cannot escape their biology, and the ambitions of those who inadvertently become child bearers, are reduced by having to nurture children. In *Borgen*, children are obstacles to a woman’s progress and are there to remind women that they also have responsibilities as mothers.

Men have traditionally not been child minders or responsible for domestic duties. Care of home and children has always been women’s work. But in *Borgen*, the Prime Minister’s husband is the child minder and is secondary in the marriage relationship.

Gender roles are beginning to change.

Work has liberated woman and marriage is no longer seen as her ultimate goal. And with gay and women’s liberation, the notion of marriage itself has undergone radical change.

Families are no longer the traditional grouping of father, mother and children. We now also have single parent families, homosexual families and families in which the roles of men and women have been reversed, with men as nurturers of children and women in positions of power.

The traditional family is somewhat of an obstacle to the development potential of the modern woman, and the number of singles is growing.

In her book *Girl, Woman, Other*, Bernadine Evaristo presents marriage as optional, and giving birth to a child is now simply a woman's personal choice, even a whim, and has no connection with marriage.

In *Borgen*, the reversal of traditional gender roles, takes women to the highest level – as governors in society. Women are leaders with power and men provide the love interest and romance. In *Borgen* and in *Girl, Woman, Other*, Gay and Women's Liberation are taken for granted.

As *Girl, Woman, Other* is about liberated and gay women, I expected to find gay relationships different from heterosexual relationships. Instead, I found that as gays adopt gender roles, a gay relationship still involves the usual domestic gender power structure.

Neither the TV series, written by a man, nor the novel, by a woman, reveals women's liberation as more than women's access to power. Society as a whole has not become more humanitarian as a consequence. There is more sexual freedom, but intimate relationships retain attitudes of dominance and subservience; even same sex marriages still retain the conventional inequality of roles.

We are thus made to realise that for greater freedom, sexual liberation has yet to get past stereotypical, conventional, gender roles.

FREEDOM?

romantic fantasy
of those
enclosed
in
community
and
conformity
the foundations
of civilizations;

individuality
trade-off
for safety
and security

THE BELIEVER

6 February 2020:

Last night, I watched *The Believer* again. In this film, racism, the most obvious manifestation of the fear of difference, is turned inward and gives rise to self-hatred. It examines the confusion and violence that arise from being a member of a minority group, in this case, a Jew in American society.

In this movie, inverted prejudice gives rise to violence which is really externalized self-denigration. Daniel, a young Jew, adopts the persona of the persecutor of Jews, calls himself a Nazi and wears a T-shirt, prominently embellished with a swastika. As a Nazi, he brings the beast in himself to the fore and hides a humane, sensitive, intelligent being, under its crude hide.

The movie begins with Daniel, stalking and savaging, a young Jew who obviously reveres his Jewish identity and is a devout practitioner of his religion. Daniel's attack on him is really a form of self-disparagement—a symbolic act of self-destruction that predicts where he will end.

Growing up in an anti-Semitic community, subject to its prejudice, has led to Daniel's obsessive need for respect. As he believes he cannot achieve respect as a Jew he changes his identity and becomes a member of a group of anti-Semitic fascists. He hangs out with crude men, who, having been conditioned in racial hatred and prejudice, are little more than savages.

As a Nazi, he too becomes a savage and adopts their

crude, violent ways. His shaved head and his T-shirt with its swastika cannot, however, alter the fact that underneath, he is a Jew. And he is deeply conflicted when the bunch of hooligans of which he is a member, plan to blow up a synagogue.

They enter the synagogue and begin to defile it and to vilify the Torah – the scroll of the five books of Moses. Daniel unexpectedly finds himself in anguish at the desecration of the Torah.

7 February 2020

I watched the rest of the movie today to see how Daniel resolves the crisis of identity that he has carried in his being since childhood. I still have to work out the meaning of the title, *The Believer*. Is it ironic?

I copied the dialogue of the scene in which Daniel, interviewed by a Jewish journalist, gives his understanding of existence; it is a heterodox renunciation of his Jewish identity.

THE INTERVIEW

Daniel: The modern world is a Jewish disease. In this racist movement, we believe there is a hierarchy of races. You know, whites at the top, blacks at the bottom, Asians, Arabs, Latins, somewhere in between. Jews, Judaism, it's like a sickness.

Journalist: All right, so it's not that the Jew runs the media, or that he owns all the banks.

Daniel: Look, the Jews clearly control the media and the banks, Investment banks, not the commercial ones, but the point is, they carry

out in those realms the exact same principles they display in sexuality. They undermine traditional life and they deracinate society. Deracinate – tear out the roots. A real people derives its genius from the land, from the sun, from the sea, from the soil. This is how they know themselves. But Jews don't even have soil.

Journalist: There's Israel

Daniel: Yeah, those aren't Jews

Journalist: Of course, they're Jews

Daniel: Notice the Israelis, It's a fundamentally secular society. They no longer need Judaism because they have soil. The real Jew is a wanderer. He's a nomad; he's got no roots and no attachments so he universalises everything. He can't hammer a nail or plough a field. All he can do is buy and sell and invest capital, manipulate markets, and it's like all mental. He takes the life of a people rooted in soil and turns it into a cosmopolitan culture based on books and numbers and ideas. You know, this is his strength. Take the greatest Jewish minds – Marx, Freud, Einstein. What have they given us? Communism, infantile sexuality and the atom bomb. In the three centuries it's taken these people to emerge from the ghettos of Europe, they've ripped us out of a world order and reason, thrown us into class warfare, irrational urges, relativity, into a world where the very existence of matter and meaning is in question! Why? Cos it's the deepest impulse of a Jewish soul to pull at the very fabric of life till there's nothing left but a thread. They want nothing but nothingness. Nothingness without end.

Denial of identity is very common among victims of racism and writer, Henry Bean, author of *The Believer*, turns a Jew, into a Jew-basher.

By placing racial prejudice against Jews, in a Jew who repudiates his Jewishness, he emphasises, most powerfully, the irrationality of racism.

8 February 2020

I looked on the Internet and found FILMMAKER's interview of Henry Bean.

FILMMAKER: Screenwriters are taught that conflict, and usually external conflict, produces drama.

BEAN: I'm drawn to a conflict that's internal, that's within a character, and not between characters. One of the problems I've had in Hollywood is either an inability or lack of interest in externalizing that conflict and embodying it in different characters.

FILMMAKER: *Deep Cover* and *Internal Affairs*, two films you've written, suggest there are two forces at work within a character. This then extends to *The Believer* as well. The protagonist couldn't be any more "undercover" than as a Nazi.

BEAN: That's why I have to go in another direction — two is not enough. I should go for three or four! I do think we tend to get too dualistic, too "either/or" when really there's a multiplicity of choices.

FILMMAKER: Maybe this duality is the only way you can present these themes to a goyish

audience to help them understand the subtleties of the issue.

BEAN: That's a good point. My wife's son, the novelist Paul Hond, said, "This isn't a movie about a Jewish Nazi, this is a movie about being Jewish." This is what it feels like, this crazy mishegas, this overblown stuff — that's the way Jews hyper-dramatize their lives.

All victims of racism are forced to question their identities. And the adoption of the persona of the oppressor is common among racially oppressed peoples — quite common in apartheid South Africa where it was/is indicated by a term such as "play white".

As no one wants to live with the stigma of inferiority, he will find means, perverse as well as reasonable, to obliterate it.

I still have to work out the meaning of the title of the movie. *The Believer* is certainly about belief. Daniel, as a youngster in *schul* searching for belief, declares that God is not a God of love, but a dictator simply asserting his power.

Is the believer, Daniel's inner being that he is trying to eradicate, but cannot? The racial prejudice that isolates him from the mainstream has led to self-deprecation, and has created in Daniel inordinate need for acceptance — as is indicated by his adoption of the identity of the persecutor. As a Nazi, he makes the following paradoxical declaration of what it means to be a Jew.

DANIEL: He (a Jew) wants to be hated. He longs for our scorn. He clings to it as if

it were the source of his being. If Hitler had not existed, the Jews would have invented him. For without such hatred, the so-called Chosen People would vanish from the earth.

And this reveals a terrible truth and the crux of our problem as Nazi's. The worse the Jews are treated, the stronger they become. Egyptian slavery made them a nation. The papyrus hardened them. Auschwitz gave birth to the State of Israel. Suffering it seems, is the very crucible of their genius,

So if the Jews are, as one of their own has said, a people who will not take "yes" for an answer, let us say "yes" to them. They thrive on opposition. Let us cease to oppose them. The only way to annihilate this insidious people once and for all, is to open our arms to them. Only then will they vanish into assimilation, normality and love.

But we cannot pretend.

The Jew is nothing if not clever. He will see through hypocrisy and condescension. To destroy him, we must love him sincerely.

Journalist: If the Jews are strengthened by hate then wouldn't this be the destruction you speak of, whether it's by love or any other means. Wouldn't that make them more powerful than they are already.

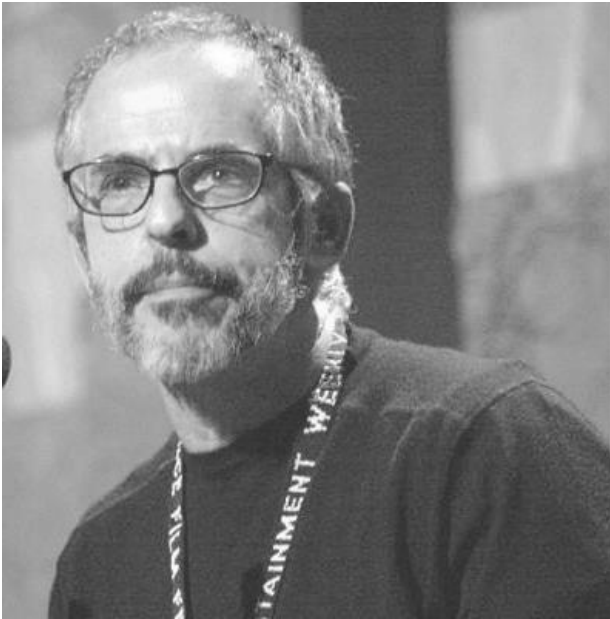
Daniel: Yes, infinitely more. They would become as God. It is the Jews destiny to be annihilated so they can be deified. Jesus understood this perfectly. And look what was accomplished there, with the death of just one enlightened Jew. Imagine what would happen if we killed them all. So let us say together, Sh'ma, Israel.

At the end of the movie, we see Daniel running non-stop up stairs searching. As he runs, a man standing on a landing, calls out: “Don’t you know there’s nothing up there?”

But Daniel doesn’t stop and as he keeps passing the man on the landing, it is clear he is running round in circles going nowhere.

He cannot accept that there is nothing there.

He is The Believer.



Henry Bean

I have to find Bean’s other movies – *Deep Cover* and *Internal Affairs*.

GRAND ILLUSION

from days of antiquity
quest for immortality;
 so we postulate
 a soul incarnate
that we consecrate
 to life forever
 in a hereafter:
transmigration
to another station
 wakening
 to everlasting
 life

APARTHEID

After examining *The Believer* which deals with racism, I decided to include an essay that I wrote four years ago about my personal experience of living in a racist society.

2016

WHAT I GAINED FROM APARTHEID

I was born in 1935, when South Africa was a state within the British Empire. In 1948, when I was thirteen, the South African Government introduced the policy of apartheid, which, in my opinion, was simply a legalized, formally structured version of the racial colonial policy that had obtained until then. Both colonialism and apartheid were based on the principle of separate development.

In 1994, after the overthrow of the white supremacist government, we were, at last, all enfranchised and, at the age of fifty-eight, I voted for the first time. I voted for Nelson Mandela's government that would represent all the people of South Africa. I have voted twice since, but never again. My vote represents the power I give to government and I cannot go on mandating absolute power as it inevitably leads to corruption.

I am not sorry that I spent fifty-eight years of my life in an officially racially segregated society in which I

belonged to a despised minority group. As a matter of fact, I am very glad that I did. Living in such a society gave me the greatest gift of my life. It set me on the path to making my own understanding of existence. Living under racism, you were constantly being reminded that you were not an acceptable part of humanity. You were an outsider and what was true for those superior to you, was not true for you.

I was thus being made conscious of the system. And since there were different conditions for different “races”, I became aware of systems within the system. Though, as a child, I conformed to the dictates of various systems, I was being conditioned to regard them as superimposed structures, and I developed double vision; by that I mean I became a participant-observer of my circumstances.

And I began to repudiate strict control of my life.

As a child, I flouted family conventions. I was disobedient and a petty thief; I stole money that was left lying around.

Our family lived in a tiny “Indian” location, the Asiatic Bazaar in Marabastad, Pretoria, in the Transvaal Province, a former Boer Republic. We had moved there from Durban, when I was two. As my parents were from Durban and Pietermaritzburg in Natal, a former British colony, they did not speak Afrikaans. Our family spoke English. In the Asiatic Bazaar, a ghetto for people of Indian descent, referred to as the Location, we lived among people who spoke Indian languages, Afrikaans (the localized version of Dutch) and English.

My brothers, sister and I, did not speak Afrikaans or an Indian language. So we were different from the Tamil-

speaking children of the Location, and were aliens in the community and at school.

Furthermore, my sister, Seetha, and I had bobbed hair and often wore shorts or slacks – shocking for “Indians” of the 1940s. My mother was “modern”, i.e. not strictly conventional. One Tamil school teacher took exception to our dress and put us in line with boys since we were dressed like boys.

When I was about ten, our neighbor across the road, Uncle Murrthi, the officiating priest at the little Tamil temple, a tin shanty in the school grounds, gave me the job of cleaning the little temple and the lamps and trays used during prayers at the Sunday service. That was woman’s work; as he had two sons and no daughters, the job was given to me.

But I was a petty thief with no respect for systems. The rituals of the religion meant nothing to me. As I did not understand them, I could not develop reverence for them. I was an outsider not a believer. So when I went to clean the temple, I would steal a few of the coins that worshippers put in the tray of ashes. Ashes are used to mark the forehead with a horizontal stripe – the indication of a worshipper of Lord Shiva.

I did not understand religious rituals and the idea of faith baffled me. As I could not respect what I did not understand, I could never immerse myself in religious mysteries. But I was not a revolutionary – simply a nonconformist. I performed duties assigned to me mechanically, without respect and to exploit.

In 1948, when the new political system, Apartheid, was promulgated, our family returned to Durban; perhaps my father believed it would be less oppressive in an English-speaking environment. So, at thirteen, I was once more in a foreign environment, and my status as outsider was further consolidated.

My father's brothers, MD Naidoo and MJ Naidoo, frequent visitors in our home, were revolutionaries, actively involved in the struggle against apartheid. Uncle MD introduced me to the theory of evolution and to communism. Though I did not fully understand either, I felt that they justified my view of faith as irrational.

In 1956, my twenty-first year, I was appointed to the staff of Dartnell Crescent Primary School. The principal, Mrs Pauline Morel, who was Jewish, was actively involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. She was a close friend of Alan Paton and belonged to his Liberal Party.

She was also passionate about theatre and as I loved acting, I became involved in her theatre ventures. She had many friends amongst the upper class Indians in the community, had organised them into a theatre group and had directed several of Rabindranath Tagore's plays. I was a hanger-on of this group and was given tiny roles in the plays – usually as an old woman or a servant.

In this group, I again became aware of difference. Though I was of Indian descent, I was not of the same class or ethnicity as the Indian elites who were light skinned and well-groomed.

This group put on plays by Tagore and Kalidasa.

But Ronnie Govender – at that time a young would-be playwright, now an established one, set up a different theatre group. It was Ronnie's desire to present original plays about people living under apartheid.

I joined his theatre group as a director.

While waiting for the full-length original plays that our members were writing, I directed shows of well-known plays, original one-acts and revues. Amongst our performances was Arthur Miller's, *All My Sons*. When I applied to the American Embassy for permission to do the play, the American Cultural Attaché became aware of our interest in American plays – I had also directed Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*.

The Cultural Attaché offered me the opportunity to study in the US and in 1965, I was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study theatre and drama at Indiana University. And in the States, I was in a new system – a working democracy. But it was also the time of Black people's assertion of their right to liberty, fraternity and equality and Mary Daly's exposé of women's oppression. So my time in the States, was also my initiation into the struggle for Black and women's liberation.

I returned to South Africa in 1976, and my theatre ventures became part of the fringe theatre movement that had developed in black communities. It was not a means to earn a living. Theatre groups came together after work to create their plays and performances. We were outside the system and our plays were condemnations of the system. All our efforts invited police surveillance and sometimes harassment.

I earned my living as a school teacher; and as an opponent of the system, was transferred or fired a few times. Eventually, in 1984, I was at Woodmead High School in Johannesburg, a non-racial school set up in defiance of apartheid by Steyn Krige in 1970 – and I was home.

At Woodmead, I worked in the Department of Integrated Studies under Head of Department, Chris de Villiers. He had created a department in which learning was a democratic process. Students were involved in decisions about what they learned and how they learned. In this non-racial situation, I began to believe in democracy.

And it was here that I met Tom Swart who came to study the methods that Chris had instituted. And in 1988, when Tom was appointed Vice-Rector of Giyani College of Education in Gazankulu – Apartheid's Homeland for Tsonga-speaking people – he invited me to join the staff. Tom set up an institution that was completely democratic. Everyone, including students, janitorial staff and gardeners were brought into the management of the college. For the first time I was experiencing real democracy and my faith in it was confirmed.

Tom introduced me to Alvin Toffler's works and I learned from Toffler's Wave Theory how technology influences the ways in which we conduct our lives and that standardization gives us an illusion of equality and fair play. Tom also lent me George Woodcock's *The Anarchist Reader* which sees government in terms of the maxim "power corrupts" and tries to find different ways

of organising society.

In the 1990s, the political struggle in South Africa was over and in 1994, I voted for the first time. But the changes in our country were cosmetic. I saw poverty and its concomitant, crime, increase. And corruption at the highest levels made me understand fully what is meant by 'power corrupts'. I came to realise that democracy is simply an ideal. It can never be a political reality.

Democratic government is based on a capitalistic concept. We, the individuals of a society, bank our power in government when we vote, thus giving it absolute power. Clint Eastwood's film *Absolute Power*, Michael Dobbs's *House of Cards* and John Grisham's and Richard North Patterson's novels, all examine the corrupting influence of power.

From Carl Sagan's series *Cosmos*, I came to understand faith as a human construct that gives meaning to our existence. The systems we create give us a sense of stability, and are the means of abolishing the fear and insecurity that springs from the mystery of our existence. To gain control of our ever-changing circumstances, we are in constant search of stability.

And I began to understand what gave rise to apartheid. Based on the need for safety and security in a country in which they were a minority, Afrikaners, descendants of Dutch colonisers, devised a rigid system of segregation to keep black people under control and ensure the safety and security of their people.

Establishing boundaries for safety and security is the human way of coping with the fear of being in a precarious existence in vast ever-evolving circumstances. And all the systems we create are flawed as they are finite in a universe that is infinite; our civilizations are like particles in a wave. As particles, we cannot comprehend the wave – the expanding universe – so we spend all our lives like barnacles, attempting to fix ourselves in time and place. The more we strive for fixity, the more oppressive we make our circumstances – and we come up with systems such as apartheid.

Milan Kundera's *Immortality*, spelt it out very clearly for me. We live in the metaphor.

identity
in ever changing
modality
floats
like a ghost
over the physical
particle in wave
indefinable

STORIES
The Lodger and Gridlock

The Lodger

This short story was written in 2005, eleven years after apartheid was outlawed. It is based on my experience of living with an ex-con. As I see prisons as a misguided and inappropriate means of dealing with people who commit crimes, after I retired, I took to visiting women in prison.

When one of them was released, I continued to visit her and seeing her struggling to find suitable living quarters, offered her accommodation in my home in a housing complex, formerly all-white – until I moved in.

THE LODGER

“Look there. What’s that?”

Mynah Bird turned and watched as the crown of a soft garden hat, like a tendril, began to push its way up in slow motion, over the top of her garden wall, and burgeon into a floppy brim over a face whose eyes were scrupulously fixed on the ground below. This was the second time that this exotic bloom had attached itself to that very spot on the wall. It was a vantage point from which her entire little lounge could easily be scrutinised through the patio doors.

The day before, while seated at lunch with Anna, her lodger of a few days, she had become aware of the strange outgrowth above the garden wall. It had appeared as soon as it was discovered that a white woman had moved in with her.

On seeing the head of her neighbor, flowering above the wall, Mynah turned to Anna, “Is he looking at you?”

“Yes, staring straight at me,” replied Anna, titillated and amused.

But Mynah, flabbergasted, immediately jumped to a whole set of wild conclusions. Such blatant prying – 008, in the guise of shrubbery!

Her neighbours had seen the Correctional Services car that had pulled up in front of her house the day before her lodger arrived. Then the next afternoon when she had brought Anna in, 008’s wife, 007, right behind her in her Mercedes, had smiled and waved. Soon afterwards, the Correctional Services vehicle had driven in again and Anna had gone out to sign their log.

The neighbours were filled with suspicion. They were aware that Mynah visited women in prison. Had she brought an ex-con into the complex? No decent white woman would degrade herself like this. The whole point of a complex is to keep criminals out, not bring them in and nurture them.

Mynah laughed to herself, *Good god, I have created a situation!* Hence the appearance of the surveillance flower. So now she waited for the next happening – the reconnaissance!

Two days later, just after Mynah had fetched Anna from work, and they were in the living room with mugs of tea, there was a knock at the open door – 007. Mynah smiled and invited her in. Normally 007 stayed at the door; she never had time to visit, but on this occasion she came in.

“Oh, I’m sorry; I didn’t know you had company.”

Mynah introduced Anna.

007 smiled, greeted Anna and despite her nausea at the pensioner’s furnishings, sat down with them,

“We’re having tea. Will you join us?”

“No thanks, I just popped in for a moment.”

“Are you on holiday now?”

“Yes, thank goodness! We’ve shut up shop for the year. I can relax at last.”

“Going away for Christmas?”

“Yes. Looking forward to a marvellous vacation at the coast.” 007 turned to Anna. “And where are you from?”

A question like this, perfectly normal, had been expected. Still, there was a hint of embarrassment as

Anna replied that she was from the city.

Mynah explained, “Anna is lodging with me for a while.”

Realising that they were not going to volunteer information, 007 changed the subject. “Actually, I’ve come to invite you to a *braai* that George (008) and I are organising – a get-together of the residents of the complex.”

“Oh, what a novel idea! We’ve never had a get-together. What a nice way to round off the year.”

“Well. It’s not actually an end of year party, rather a beginning of the New Year party.”

“Oh, so when will it be?”

“About the middle of January.”

“Oh. ... Okay. Well, it will be a good way to start the year; getting to know one another – becoming a community at last.”

007 stood up and Mynah walked with her to the door, where 007 collected her umbrella – much needed showers had been falling since the beginning of the week – and left.

Anna burst out laughing. “Well, now she knows what a serial killer looks like.” Anna would have continued but she saw the umbrella bobbing along the spy wall and checked herself.

When it disappeared, she said, “So you’ve been invited to a party – sometime next year! You will have to mark it down in your diary or you’ll forget.” She laughed and inquired archly, “I wonder if I’m invited.” Then she frowned, “They won’t make trouble for you, will they? She sighed: “I shouldn’t have come.”

“Nonsense! They’re just inquisitive that’s all. 007 is

actually a friend.”

That night, Mynah tossing and turning in bed, saw secret meetings at which alarming drops in property values and strange old Indian biddies were the main topics. She saw herself hauled before the body corporate, frogmarched to the gate and flung out onto the street.

When she got up in the morning, she decided on greater discretion and approached Anna.

“Do you think you could ask Correctional Services to wait at the complex gate when they come? You could go out to sign. It’s not that I am afraid, but there’s no need to attract attention.”

Anna agreed and from then on, Correctional Service vehicles did not enter the premises.

Still, interest in the lodger did not wane; it took a new turn. A few days later, a couple of men walking past the house, suddenly turned their heads, like soldiers at the ‘eyes right’ command, and stared at Anna. She was an attractive blonde, nearing forty; and her good looks had reached full maturity.

She was always telling Mynah, “They all love me at work. I’m the only woman there and they love me.”

Anna was warm, bright and breezy, so it was not surprising that men were attracted to her.

“Bafana is in love with me. He wants to marry me. He suggested that he and I and Rudolph rent a flat together. But I don’t trust him. Rudolph is OK but I don’t know about Bafana.”

This was before she had moved in with Mynah. At that time, Mynah had realised that Anna was angling for a

room in her house. She had been hinting at it since she got out. And Mynah was on the point of making the offer. She felt sorry for the woman; she had seen the place where she was staying and had for a couple of months been involved in a tremendous internal debate. She would lose her privacy and total freedom of action if she brought her into her home.

But she knew she was being selfish -- so she did it.

It did not occur to her that she would lose more than her freedom – she had not expected to lose her seclusion. In the years that she had lived alone, she had ignored everyone and everyone had ignored her. And she had treasured her solitude. But in this complex, being the first black to invade it, her home and her doings were up for scrutiny.

Now more so, as Anna was white.

One morning, before Anna left for work, she told Mynah that women talking loudly outside her window had awakened her; she hadn't caught what they were saying except when one of them exclaimed, "So, this is the new South Africa"

Mynah's imagination jumped into overdrive. *It's only in soap operas that discrimination has disappeared altogether and there its demise has a mostly prurient value. Does that apply here as well? I have lived all alone in the complex for at least six years with hardly any visitors. People often think that single women are closet gays. Perhaps my neighbours think I have now taken a lover.*

Mynah chuckled to herself. People always speculate about recluses and perhaps she was now acquiring a far

more interesting persona.

Anna meanwhile, being a woman with very worldly interests, was flourishing under all the attention. She took to playing her guitar and singing romantic songs in the garden. And then, one day, from the wall behind her – a humming accompaniment! A single tenor, but soon after, another hummer, in the days that followed more and more hummers and soon, she had the accompaniment of a full blown humming chorus.

Then one evening it happened!

Anna had picked up her guitar, gone out into the garden, and begun to strum as usual, while sticky anthers, dropping pollen, surfaced along the wall. As her voice rose in full-throated richness, accompanied by the humming chorus, all was suddenly drowned out. Strident Valkyrie voices, descending on the wall, drowned out the hummers. Contrapuntal renderings from a full-blown chorus of mezzos, contraltos and sopranos in recitative, rose to a crescendo and blended into a momentous resolve.

Mynah, whose nose was in a book as usual, jumped up in shock, ran to her bedroom window and found herself looking out on a wild and furious battle scene. She clutched at her heart, which was beating uncontrollably, as she saw the male choir suddenly plucked from the wall and sent scuttling off, to raucous laughter whipping them from behind.

As the thunder faded into the distance, she hoped it

was all over now that her wall had been deflowered.

But within seconds, a clarion call announcing the beginning of a major skirmish shook the skies and she saw the troops mustering to begin the descent upon her garden. She ran out to warn Anna, who was calmly seated on the patio trying out new melodies, but she was too late

The wives, pouring into the garden like a flood, swept Mynah aside, plummeting her into her plumbago bush, and hauled Anna out of her chair. As chords of the triumphant chorus crashed all about, she was frogmarched out of the garden, down the pathway to the entrance gate, and flung out into the street. Then the troops, dusting their hands off, mustered at the gate and watched till Anna disappeared around the corner.

Mynah kept calling to the troops from above, “She has nowhere to go,” but of course they couldn’t hear her even though she was hovering right over them.

Mynah watched 007 lead the troops back into the complex and as they dispersed into their various homes, she skimmed over the entrance gate and floated after Anna who was marching down the road. Mynah called to her but Anna simply walked round the block, came back to the complex, opened the gate with her remote and walked in.

No one saw her as she marched back to the house and into the kitchen through the open garage. Mynah followed her as she searched the house and kept calling to her to look up and see her but Anna couldn’t hear her.

Eventually Anna went out into the garden. Mynah flew out with her and from the patio roof, took one look below and saw her body lying in the plumbago bush,

covered with blue flowers,.

“Oh, for goodness sakes! I’m dead. So what happens next?”

But she would have to figure that out later. Her concern now was for Anna. Mynah had suddenly become clairvoyant or something and *knew* the terrible thing that was going to happen. Though she could not, she still wanted to stop it.

Anna, seeing Mynah’s body in the bush, froze in horror. Mynah knew she was going to scream and she shouted with all her might, “Don’t scream. Don’t scream. Whatever you do, don’t scream.”

But of course, she could not be heard and Anna’s cry resounding through the complex brought the women streaming back into the garden.

When they saw Mynah’s body, 007 immediately called the police and before the night was over, Anna had been arrested for murder. 007 looked most satisfied.

“Well, girls, this has been a very good day’s work. Good old Mynah, she did the right thing. Now she’s gone to a better place and Anna is back where she came from. We’d better make sure that the next owner of this house understands what it means to live in our complex.”

Mynah’s house was put up for auction and a family, newly escaped from Mamelodi, moved in. A house- once occupied by a Black, had no market value, except to other Blacks. Though the new owners were Blackbirds, they showed complete understanding of security complex living. They kept to themselves and like all their neighbours, put in an alarm system and had a security

company monitor their property. They brought no undesirables into the complex, not even relatives.

“Why am I hanging around? There’s nothing I can do here.” Mynah, who had been sitting on her TV aerial, suddenly took off into the wild blue yonder.

“Oh well, at least travel is free now.”

Fiction

seeds of fact
sown in fantasy
flower in faction
regeneration
in imagination
creating
the meaning
of life’s reality

Gridlock

This story, which opens with Mynah Bird stuck in a Sudoku puzzle, was written in 2008, and is set in the Curiosity Shop of Irene Homes.



Carol Parsons
Manager of the Curiosity Shop

In 2000 or 2001, I received a notice with my rates bill calling for volunteer workers at the shop which had been set up to raise funds for Irene Homes, a shelter for mentally challenged, at that time, all white women.

As a retiree, I offered my services not knowing, being black, whether I would be accepted. But this being the new South Africa, I was and found myself among other retiree volunteers, all white. I worked in the shop two days a week – Wednesday afternoons and Saturdays for just over a decade.

GRIDLOCK
(2008)

Mynah Bird finds herself in a cell and isn't sure she is in the right one.

Obviously not!

Voices are shouting, 'No, no, no. Get out! You're in the wrong cell.'

She feels a tremor of protest moving from left to right along the horizontal row in which she waits.

'She doesn't belong here. Get her out.'

Another vibration begins over and under her along the vertical, 'She doesn't belong here either.'

Rejected on all sides, she tries another cell but is kicked out. 'Trespasser! Stop trying to jam up the works. Find your own cell.'

Not knowing where to go, she jumps back into the first cell but now someone is in there and she lets out a screech,

'Who are you? What are you doing in my cell? It's not logical. This is my assignment. Get out!'

The others along the row call out, 'What's her number?'

'I don't know. Numero Uno help! She'll make the whole structure seize up. Get her to her assigned cell?'

Numero Uno yells at Mynah, 'What's wrong with you? Look at your number and find your cell.'

Utterly confused, Mynah pops willy-nilly into cells and is kicked about like a football.

'Hey, Uno, she's crazy. Can't think logically.'

Mynah's head is spinning. She has to get out of this web. But how? She tries to force her way into other cells but that causes such a panic that Numero Uno shouts out again. "Look at your number and find your cell!"

But Mynah doesn't know what to do.

"What's wrong with you? Can't find your number? Okay gang, number off. Let's see where she fits in."

Inmates in the horizontal row begin to number off but stop when they get to five; there is no number five.

"Okay, that must be your number. Get into the cell between cells Nine and Two."

"No, no, no," a shout from above in the vertical row. "I'm a Five. Can't have two Fives in the same row."

"Well, there's only one thing for it," Uno concludes, "I'll have to get out of the grid to inspect her."

A strong outburst, "No, don't do that! The danger of gridlock is too great. We'll all be left stranded, incomplete, unfinished, jettisoned into a meaningless existence, a fate worse than death."

"Oh, cut the melodrama. Hang on, here I go." Uno jumps out and the whole grid goes into a spasm. Uno comes up to Mynah, takes one look and is ricocheted back into his cell. "Red alert! Red alert! No number!"

All the others screech in horror, "Oh no! A Virus."

Uno yells, "Ready! All together now! Squeeze!"

The whole grid contracts violently and Mynah is expelled.

Back behind the counter of the Curiosity Shop, eyes knocking together in her head, she is vaguely aware of the queue that has formed in front of the till. Eventually all the smiling, nodding heads come into focus. Holding

cokes and chips in their hands, the residents of Irene Homes stand patiently, waiting for her to finish her Sudoku puzzle.

She flings it aside to attend to them.

And soon the cash register is ringing and clanging, but the till finds this grazing diet of small change quite unsatisfying; it longs for the big meals that dealers looking for bargains bring to its voracious mouth.

Just as the last resident moves off, Mynah hears a terrible shout, looks through the shop window and sees a man outside being swallowed up by his cell phone. Having ingested him, the mobile becomes involved in a vociferous argument and hops around on the veranda clearly transmitting a furious battle of wills.

To escape the fracas, Mynah, who is wearing her hearing aids for a change, picks up her Sudoku puzzle again – then thinks better of it. She is not going to be pulled into that chaotic situation again. It always happens when she makes a mistake. She draws another grid instead and copies the given numbers from the original to start over.

But the cell phone has hopped into the shop, is standing at the book display next to the pay point, spluttering vehemently as the struggle within continues.

Cell phones, like spoilt kids, are inconsiderate and rude; they butt in at any time, demand immediate attention and exert their will on all around.

Mynah thanks her lucky stars she is a loner. No need for a cell phone!

As she sets aside the Sudoku and begins working on the less compelling ten minute crossword, she sees out of the corner of her eye, the man emerging from the cell-

phone which shrinks to normal size and desperately tries to cling to his ear, but he pulls it off and deposits it in his pocket. He turns sheepishly to Mynah but her head is very pointedly stuck in the crossword and he goes off, thankfully, to look for bargains in the shop.

Meanwhile, the assistant-manager, Sipho, brings Mynah a cup of coffee just the way she likes it, weak with hot milk and sugar. It is always a pleasure to see Sipho with his big smile and hearty manner, ready to do his best for anyone and everyone. His willingness to please, so often mistaken for a desire to ingratiate, leads to abuse from people who see him as a menial. But he is that rare thing, a genuine Christian. He is wonderful with the residents of the Homes who always demand a hug from him when they find him in the shop.

But some customers just see him as a menial.

Just a few days before, a woman who didn't want a box for her many purchases, took the small items to her car in one of the shopping baskets. After she went out, Mynah turned to the next customer. While she was busy, the woman returned. She realised that she needed help with the bigger items and asked where the boy was.

Mynah, in the middle of her calculations, froze. She wanted to shoot the woman straight into the grid of her impossible Sudoku puzzle, but she simply said, 'We don't have boys here.'

'Where's that black chap? What's his name?'

'You mean the assistant-manager? I have no idea where he is at the moment.' She knew perfectly well that he was in the office.

The woman realising that Mynah had turned into an icicle, grabbed the rest of her stuff and left the shop.

The bird sniffed: people like her took people like Siphso for granted. A man with Siphso's competences and qualities should be in top management but here he is working in the Homes' charity shop.

Oh Mynah, Mynah, Mynah get off your high horse! You know perfectly well that "race" prejudice is a virus and only children born after 1994 are being immunised against it. The rest, including you, you old bat, are still apartheid-immune-deficient. The only difference is – you know you tested positive.

No one to serve at the moment, Mynah turns to her crossword, the clue 'Entertainer (7).' Looking at the space for the word, she sees s-e at the end, *Okay, artiste*, and is about to fill it in when the man with the aggressive cell phone comes to the counter with a large framed print: a portrait of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns, walking alone in a garden.

The man sets it down behind the counter to reserve it while he goes for another large picture hanging on the wall opposite, a reproduction of Michelangelo's famous Sistine chapel depiction of Adam receiving life from the finger of God. Two expensive items! A big sale! The till is ecstatic, a decent meal at last.

But Mynah is curious. "Two religious pictures? Are you...?" She doesn't quite know what to ask, "Are you in the church?"

He sets the second picture down. "I am trying to find my God. I have so many troubles in my life and I don't

want to do something bad. I want to surround myself with everything that will bring back some peace of mind... I lost my wife at the beginning of the year.'

Poor man, Mynah is thinking, but he continues.

"Now I've lost my children too. She came and stole them from me last month. So I have nothing."

Oh, she isn't dead! She must have divorced or abandoned him and now has taken away the children. Poor man!

Suffering flows from his eyes into the eyes of Jesus in the picture leaning against the counter. Mynah is full of sympathy but says nothing, just listens; that is what he needs.

"I feel so rotten inside; I don't want to do anything bad but it is so hard. You must have heard me on the phone. That was someone telling me to be patient, telling me to turn the other cheek. It's easy to talk when it's not happening to you. He was telling me I ought to forgive. I can't forgive. I've lost everything. How can I forgive?"

Mynah nods. "It is hard."

"God is all I have now. I must put my trust in Him."

The distress in the man's voice keeps two customers waiting to be served, patient and sympathetic. "I am trying to keep all wrong thoughts out of my mind. These pictures will help me. I am going to the bank now and will be back in half an hour to pay for them."

Mynah nods and turns to the other customers.

One says, "That man is in pain."

The other customer wants to know why he is so unhappy and Mynah tells her that he has lost his family, and she asks, 'Do you know him? Does he come here often?' She is surprised when Mynah tells her it is the

first time she has seen him.

Waldo the manager of the shop, who has been out purchasing stocks for the refreshment section, comes in looking for Sipho and finds him on the veranda organising a donation of furniture items. While they are working outside, the unhappy man returns and finding Waldo on the veranda, gets talking to him.

When they eventually come in, Waldo goes straight behind the counter to get the framed prints. Mynah is busy with a little queue of residents all with cokes and chips in their hands. This time, anticipating the big amount that the man has brought, the till doesn't mind the little snacks coming in. When the man pays, Mynah is quite disgusted at the way the register snaps up the notes that Waldo hands her.

Then Waldo and Sipho straighten out cardboard boxes to use for packaging. Watching Sipho pulling cardboard over the frames and taping it down, Mynah smiles. She knows that as he works, he is imparting to the pictures the warmth and love that flow naturally from him. If only the man could really see Sipho, he would take courage from him. But "race" makes one blind.

Even though Mynah thinks that we walk around like numbers in Sudoku cells, locked away from each other, unable to acknowledge our interdependence, she firmly believes in human, not divine, intervention. So she knows that those pictures will protect that man because they have, in this shop, been infused with human caring. Mynah watches through the window as Waldo and Sipho

load the pictures on the man's bakkie (pick-up truck).

That night on TV news, Mynah hears that a man shot and killed his wife and daughter, then turned the gun on himself. *Oh no! It can't be!* She listens in vain for identification. *What could have happened? When he left the shop, he seemed determined to overcome his despair.*

The next morning, she goes out to buy a newspaper. Normally she gets the paper only for Sudoku puzzles but today she peruses every page, looking for references to the tragedy. She finds an editorial on family murders but no specific references. There are no names; mind you, she wouldn't be any the wiser if there were. She doesn't know his name.

The editor quotes experts who say that family murders are usually committed by fathers, authoritarian and possessive men who see spouses and children as extensions of themselves and therefore subject to their personal will. Killing a spouse and children is really a para-suicidal act: the father is destroying parts of himself.

Mynah blames herself. Why didn't I give the man a Sudoku puzzle? Then he would have seen for himself that an individual is never out of community. In the grid, he isn't alone. That would have saved him. Wishful thinking! He was already in spiritual gridlock. But suicide! How can anyone commit suicide? *I have no idea why we cling to life, but we do. It's a basic instinct.*

Mynah clings like a barnacle because she is not a believer: so for her this is it. There is no other life. And to give it up! This one-off, once in a cosmos miracle! Oh no, no, no, no, no! Why had he given in to his despair?

Why had he not responded to all the good feelings that had flowed out to him in the shop? She is sad. Their attempts to protect him had been futile.

Saturday at the shop, she is very busy in the opening hour serving all the men from the informal settlement. When they first invaded the shop the year before, their presence had been overpowering and Nomsa, Sipho's wife, had spent the entire morning running around with a perfumed spray. With their little money, secreted in very intimate places in their clothing, most of these men, probably illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries, could only afford socks at one rand a pair.

The till, with its voracious appetite, had been in a state of constant indignation at all the chump change. But over the months, the circumstances of these men had improved. Now, there is no need for sprays and the men are buying jeans and jackets, even some toys and non-essential articles. No more hot little coins dropped on the counter; now they flash hundred rand notes and smile back at her with confidence.

Though the till remains condescending, Mynah is quietly delighted at this transformation. The men have found their place in the grid.

After they leave, the shop is quiet.

Then one of the residents of the Homes comes in. She is dressed in black. Mynah assumes she is going to the funeral of an elderly resident who died at the beginning of the week.

But she is not. "I can't go to funerals. I get too upset. My housemother understands. No, I cannot go to funerals. My parents always protect me when I attend

funerals with them; they don't let me see anything. It's not that I don't care. Jane is my friend. I have known her since 1983; there are others who have known her longer. I care about her but I can't go. I don't know what the others will say. But," she shudders, "I can't go. I care about her ..."

Mynah interrupts, "You don't have to go to the funeral; you can say a little prayer for her in your room."

"Oh yes, I have the whole service here." She thumps her Bible. "I will go to my room and sing all the hymns. The service starts at half-past-two. I don't have to go to the church; I will go to my room. You see, that's how I'll pay my last respects to my friend."

She picks up the usual packet of chips and a coke and pays for them. "I am taking this for my pudding after lunch." And she is off.

Mynah is glad that the lull in the shop has allowed her to listen. So often residents come in to chat but most times she cannot give them the attention they seek.

As it stays quiet in the shop, Mynah searches for Sudoku puzzles in old newspapers that they use for wrapping fragile items. She finds about five or six and is delighted. She won't have to buy the newspaper for a few days.

While she is tearing out the puzzle pages, the man comes in, the man who bought the religious prints. She looks up in surprise and almost rushes out from behind the counter to hug him – but he is white and she is a mynah.

"I am so glad to see you. I was worried about you."

He smiles, "Is Waldo here?"

"He's just stepped out for a minute. He won't be

long.” The man looks disappointed so she asks, “Are you enjoying your pictures?”

The man gives her a long look. “That’s why I’m here. Those paintings ... I have to tell Waldo.”

Waldo comes in just then. The man rushes up to him and clasps his hand. Looking over his shoulder, Waldo discreetly raises his eyebrows.

“This gentleman has come back to tell you about the framed prints he bought from us; the portrait of Jesus and the Michelangelo.”

“Oh yes. Is there a problem?” As the man looks close to tears, Waldo invites him to sit down in one of the chairs around the heater. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

The man nods and Waldo goes off to the kitchen.

Mynah, at the till, sees the man making an effort to pull himself together. Waldo comes back, sets a mug on the counter for her as he passes, hands over a mug to the man and settles down opposite him. The man takes a gulp, then leans forward and speaks to Waldo in Afrikaans.

Though Mynah is unable to converse in the language, she understands it. Sipping her coffee, she picks up the Sudoku puzzle in which she got lost the other day, but she listens.

The man begins hesitantly. ‘I don’t know how to tell you what happened. I don’t know whether you will believe me. Last week, after I bought those two paintings, I took them home and hung them in the living room. Desperately wanting a miracle that would restore my life, I sat looking at them. There is Adam. Soon he will

have Eve and won't be so damn lonely. Not like me. My wife gone; my children gone -- damn! This isn't life. This is death. I am dead. All her fault! Just like Eve, she betrayed me. Women are all the same. You can't trust them. Why can't they be faithful? ... I see her, standing in front of me with her new boyfriend, smiling. It isn't fair. She is happy! And she has the kids! My kids! And she's my wife! Dammit, she's still mine! That's my family. They belong to me! ...

Why should I sit here, all alone, suffering? I won't let her get away with it. ...

I went to my room, found my revolver and loaded it. This was it. I was going to put an end to it all. If I had to die, I wouldn't die alone. I knew where she was – with her mother. Picking up my car keys, I made for the front door but what I saw sent me rearing back in terror...

The portrait! It was hanging on the door. What was it doing there? I hadn't hung it there. How did it get there? I ran into the living room to look and found an empty space on the wall where it had been. I crept back to the entrance hall and screamed with fright. The frame was still on the door but the figure was gone...

Oh God! What is happening? I staggered back into the lounge. I'm going mad! I'm going mad! ...

I fell on my knees, pulled out the revolver, put it to my head and as my finger curled around the trigger, I saw the bare feet ... He was bending over me!

I must have fainted. When I opened my eyes, I was lying with my head on His lap. I looked up but all I could see was the crown of thorns. Then gently, He asked me to look at the other picture: "Do you see?"

At first all I could see was Adam lying inert; then my

gaze followed his arm to the finger, the fingers – the synapse! And I saw, as if for the first time.

Then a soft entreaty, “Now, speak to the Creator. Tell Him why you have to take the life He has given you.”

I couldn’t say a word.

“Explain why you can take the life He has given your wife, your children?”

What could I say?

“Tell him their lives belong to You. You gave them life. You can take it away at Your will?”

My head dropped in shame. Blasphemy! Such blasphemy! “Forgive me, Lord. My heart has been filled with hate.”

And the dams that had welled up behind my eyelids burst and washed the pride from my soul.

I awoke in the early hours of the morning, to find myself lying on the living room floor. I looked around but couldn’t see Him. I thought He was gone but then I saw. The painting was back in its place, the figure leaning forward as before, as He had leaned over a broken man holding a revolver to his temple.”

Mynah, who has found the hidden number in her Sudoku puzzle, smiles and looks up to contemplate the man. He believes in divine intervention and it has put him in his cell and he is back in the grid again.

TRADITION

ritual
not renewal
strict reliance
on compliance
past values
ancient views
mummification
of superstition
looking backward
not forward
not up
to see
a man
land
on the moon
no conception
of universal expansion
completely atavistic
proudly chauvinistic