

Interviews

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‘I write what I like’ – The Trantraal brothers share their love for their craft Part 1

WritingThreeSixty met with the Trantraal brothers André and Nathan on Tuesday 27 November 2014 to discuss their most recent creative projects, and their fascinating work as writers and comic book animators.

WritingThreeSixty: What are you currently working on?

André: I am working on a novel, *Ecstasy*. *Ecstasy* is a story about a young boy growing up in Mitchells Plain and Bishop Lavis during the late eighties and early nineties. It is based on my personal story growing up. It focuses on themes of religion and politics.

Nathan: I am working on my second poetry collection, *Alles het niet kom wôd*. It is about growing up and out of religion. It is written from my own perspective and it focuses on themes of religion and politics.

André: My brother and I have a shared capital in terms of experience so we have overlapping themes but we write from your own perspective and our own experiences.

WritingThreeSixty: Nathan, you have published a collection of poetry last year, titled *Chokers en Survivors* but you have also written an unpublished short story, could you elaborate on what the story entails?

Nathan: The short story I wrote called *Delilah* was meant to be a teleplay for KykNet, it was inspired by my time at school as an introvert.

André: Writing for television is like giving your child up for adoption, and your child is abused. [Laughs].

WritingThreeSixty: Andre, you're writing a novel, could you tell us about it. Why did you want to write this novel? Is there a moral or message to it?

André: I wrote *Ecstasy* because I have always wanted to write an English language novel. My first language is Kaaps and it is the language that I speak most of the time, but I only read English books. I used to read a lot of Afrikaans as a child, but stopped when I reached high school. I did not find Afrikaans books interesting any more. As to the second part of your question, I try to avoid moral messages like the plague. I cannot stand any book that tries to teach me a lesson about anything. For me that kind of George Eliot writing should have died with the Victorians. I like writing where the more subtle nuances correspond to my own experiences as a human being.

WritingThreeSixty: You were promoting your comics *Crossroads* and *Coloureds* at the Franschhoek Literary Festival in May and at the Open Book Festival in September. What was your experience like as being part of the line-up for these literary festivals for 2014?

Nathan: It is always funny to me. There are mostly white people at these literary festivals. Now we are there too and we are also important. When I speak everyone listens. But I do not take it seriously.

WritingThreeSixty: What is the selling price for these comics and how are you distributing them?

André: *Crossroads* we distribute for free at schools and to the people of Crossroads. *Crossroads* is sold at The Book Lounge, Blank Books in Woodstock and Bolo Bolo in Observatory. It can also be ordered online at orders@blankbooks.co.za

Nathan: *Coloureds* we sold for R3 each, making it as accessible and widely available as possible. But Coloured people would not even buy it for R3, and white people did not want to buy it for R3 but instead bought it for R50 and R80, which is the booksellers selling price. I know it is worth more than R3 and more than R50, but all I want is for people to read it. I do not want other people's money, just read the books.

WritingThreeSixty: Where did you grow up and how has it influenced your writing?

Nathan: We grew up in Mitchells Plain and Bishop Lavis. My poetry reflects my struggle with poverty, what I write is supposed to be humourous. People say what I write is shocking, but it is not shocking to me, it is normal.

André: Growing up extremely poor you realise what is important and what is not important. You develop a refined sense of humour. You do not take yourself too seriously. Everyone in our community growing up in Mitchells Plain struggles but they do not show it, they wear expensive clothes and shoes. But in Bishop Lavis they cannot hide their poverty, everyone is poor and it shows.

WritingThreeSixty: Could you tell us a bit about the process of creating *Crossroads*, your conceptual ideas of what you wanted to achieve with this comic and working together with Koni Benson to produce a final product.

André: We work with an historian Koni Benson who received funding for the adaptation of her PhD thesis into a series of comic books based on the settlement of Crossroads [between Klipfontein and Lansdowne road intersection]. When Koni finished her PhD she gave it to me and I read it. I started adapting it chapter by chapter into a comic book. I passed it on to Nathan and Ashley Marais who are the sketch artists for the comic book and I work on the backgrounds, technical detail and inking.

Nathan: We have been working on it for five years. Twelve pages. The most sustained work we have done is in comics.

WritingThreeSixty: I live where I like. What does that saying mean to you?

André: It comes from the Steve Biko quote “I write what I like”. These people of Crossroads are portrayed as a “squatters” which has a negative connotation and these comics write against that.

WritingThreeSixty: Your interest in comic books and your comic book artistry, where does it originate from?

André: The first book I took out at my local library was the comic book *Tin Tin*. I love reading and drawing and I put these two together. I wanted to tell stories in this way, and to be able to read good comic stories. Stories with a message.

WritingThreeSixty: The comic series titled *Coloureds* published in 2010. What inspired you to create this comic book series? Who is your intended audience?

André: *Coloureds* for me was about doing a story about coloured people and how we spoke, in a broken Afrikaans dialect. Comedians in South Africa like Marc Lottering use this exaggerated coloured dialect to make white people laugh. We wanted to create something that was honest and authentic.

Nathan: When this book came out white people stopped laughing and were forced to actually deal with the issues that the comic was addressing, issues like poverty in the coloured community. They were not used to these types of people and issues. We had to do something that made people uncomfortable. They want coloured culture but it must be through a white lens. But it is about us representing ourselves and not a white version of it. You have to own it.

Crossroads is published by Isotope Media and is available from Blank Books in Woodstock, Bolo Bolo in Observatory as well as the Book Lounge. It can also be ordered online at orders@blankbooks.co.za

- Interview by Bronwyn Douman