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‘I write what I like’ – The Trantraal brothers share their love for their craft – Part 2

WritingThreeSixty got the wonderful opportunity to interview Nathan and André Trantraal about their writing process, advice to aspiring writers and how they truly feel about J.M. Coetzee.

WritingThreeSixty: Tell us about your writing process?

Nathan and André: When André wrote *Coloureds* it was a forty page story, but when I did the artwork, I do all the initial planning and drawing, I just cut a lot of the story. We would fight about what will go in the story and what we have to cut out. I respect André’s writing and we have a good balance of collaboration. I struggle with pencil sketch and André is much more technical. He edits all my pencils. We start off with hand drawn works, it is a messy process. It is like making music, every part gets recorded, separated and then everything gets mixed together in the end to create the final product. We then add the text in around the sketches.

WritingThreeSixty: I have read in a previous interview that you really admire South African born writer J.M. Coetzee, any comments on Coetzee?

André: When I am writing and feeling bogged down I literally go read Coetzee, it freshens things for me, I can look at it and it is almost like looking in a mirror. Like when you draw something and you want to see something that is wrong with it, you look at it in the mirror and you instantly see all the mistakes. Orwell had a good phrase he said, “writing should be as transparent as a window pane” I agree writing should be like that.

Nathan: I feel so different when I read Coetzee! I instantly feel smarter! The first book I ever read of [Coetzee’s] was *Boyhood*.

André: Coetzee’s writing has become a part of my own intellectual furniture. The book I have learned the most from and my personal favourite is *Elizabeth Costello*, it is something you can keep going back to, I feel that all [Coetzee’s] books are like that. I was obsessed with *Youth* for a long time, I kept going back to it over and over again. I do not know how he manages to squeeze three thousand years of literary culture into one book, I reread it all the time.

WritingThreeSixty: What do you consider to be your best accomplishment?

Nathan: When we did *Coloureds*, André always said it has to be a long book for him, it was like doing a short film. I would say our biggest accomplishment is making a living out of what we do, because for long time that is the most uncertain thing and also it is the one unpredictable factor, because no matter how hard you work there is always this huge possibility that it might not be there tomorrow. It does not matter how good you think you are. Luck was also a huge part. I am 31 and this is all I do for a living, and that seemed impossible for a long time. We were living in Bishop Lavis while we were doing *Coloureds*, we were practically homeless and we had no place to go, and we were still just doing this. You never know what is going to happen tomorrow. My mom was working, we were two adults living with our mom, it does not look good on the CV [laughs]. In the end you need to provide for your family that is all that matters. Before we always had to send stuff away, like proposals and ideas to people and sit anxiously and wait, then we would stress whether we did everything right. Now going from that to sitting with people in the publishing world, having coffee and conversations, and casually saying, ‘oh I’m busy with a new thing’ and having them say, ‘oh we’re interested’ that is the best part!

WritingThreeSixty: What writing advice do you have for aspiring authors?

Nathan: André’s got a lot of advice! I will quote him: “When you are writing you cannot write about stuff that you do not know.” I always use this example of these two Argentine guys José Muñoz and Sampayo who wrote *Joe’s Bars*. They make beautiful artwork and created an astonishing book, but they made it about people living in New York, yet they know nothing about New York, they have never even been to New York – it is completely second hand of what they see on film. You cannot trust the movies! You have to play to your strengths.

André: What I always tell Nathan is you have to find the thing that drives people. You need to be able to make a living. All creatures need to make a living. In Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*, this story is about a guy who does not want to do anything, so you have to find his motivation, what he is about.

Nathan: Also do not be sentimental, that is the most important rule!

WritingThreeSixty: Is there one topic or subject you would never write about?

André: There are a lot of writers that write about their family, you get people who write about their siblings or mom or dad and then those people do not speak to them anymore. It completely destroys their relationships, I would not do that. I would never write about my mother, if that is a shortcoming, well it would depend on how you look at it. I would never be able to write objectively about her because I am too close to her and I would not know how to separate myself and write about that in a way that I knew was truly objective.

Nathan: Robert Crumb wrote, ‘the moment he thinks he should not write about things that is immediately when he writes about it.’ I think you have to have that attitude.

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- Interview by Kareesha Naidoo