

Introduction

Antjie Krog

University of the Western Cape

One of the briefs for my appointment at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 2004 was to be available to work with manuscripts. It was the time before Creative Writing courses were offered at UWC, so manuscripts arrived from all parts of the community: from students to grandparents. Several authors had been assisted successfully to publish their work at well-respected publishing houses, others to write their histories for their families. A few years after my appointment, I picked up two pages of handwritten text that were pushed under my door. No name. It was about the rape of an 'T' by her father on the night she returned from her matric farewell. It was the first time I had come across a text like this and its power left me with a sense of deep incompetence. An incompetence of how to 'read' it, respond to it. At the same time: my ears were opened.

As part of a poetry caravan organised from UWC with international and South African poets, readings were done in four Cape Flats libraries with the poets of that area. Many poems were about rape. Unforgettable still, was a young girl standing with her back to the audience while reading and shivering. A poet from Morocco asked: is rape a big thing in South Africa? It was and it wasn't. Because it was surfacing in news stories, or as part of testimonies in court cases, it was common knowledge; but it was not in literature. About ten years later, I began to receive more and more

manuscripts around this theme, but felt myself swamped with doubt and questions and unable to really assist. How should one write about it? Should it be beautiful? Should the act itself be described? And if so, how that it is not titillating? Should the narrative have a structure? What other texts are there to read that describe a rape as it should or could be described? Is there a 'blue print' of how to write abuse? Can one ever write effectively about being beaten? Is that even something to say?

I decided to organise a workshop for those who wanted to write about an experience of sexual abuse, and invited Anne Vechter, the poet laureate of the Netherlands who wrote several powerful poems about abuse from her personal experiences. The next task was to look for 'good', already published texts ... To my dismay but not surprisingly, I battled to find things... After much reaching out and searching we had a set of ten poems and some prose which was then translated into Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa. The workshop (sponsored by UWC and the Breytenbach centre in Wellington) was attended by around ten people. Although it was put quite clearly that the workshop was not to be seen as a healing tool, but was for those who felt urged to write about an event of abuse, two psychology briefers accompanied us as well. From this workshop some texts developed over years, but through a lack of funds the project could not

be taken further. In the meantime a Creative Writing programme had been launched at UWC, but focusing at that stage only on writing in English (it has since expanded to include Afrikaans and isiXhosa), so the texts gathered here are not in English, and the contributors are not necessarily UWC students.

A chance meeting with Prof. Rosemary Jolly of Penn State University happily made further development possible. Through her funding, the women in this book were brought together for a Bodymapping workshop under the guidance of Hyunji Kwom (University of South Carolina, Art Education) and Courtney Kiehl, Esq. (lawyer for the abused and Bodymapping facilitator) where these texts were also finalised with their translations.

One of the issues thoroughly discussed was whether the writers should use their own names. The Bodymapping workshop happened after the #metoo movement, and there was no doubt: everybody wanted their own name attached to their piece. (On legal advice some names have been altered.)

These texts are remarkable because they attempt to move beyond mere testimony into the realm of literature. With this courageous act they contribute not only to the sparse bibliography of literary texts about abuse, but they are deliberately writing open new possibilities of vocabulary, style, theme and justice.

21/5/2020

Duncan Brown (Editor: English texts)

UWC Coordinating Team

Antjie Krog (coordinator, translator Afrikaans)

Nonzolo Titi (translator isiXhosa)

Nkosinathi Sithole (translator isiZulu)

Stacey Elias (psychotherapist)

Jill Flusk (logistics and organisation)

Visual material and body maps are presented here at random and anonymous.