

# Interviews

22 July 2015

## **Antjie Krog: Poetry Is The Answer!**

*WritingThreeSixty* sat down with esteemed author and academic, Professor Antjie Krog, on Thursday 4 June 2015, in her office at the University of the Western Cape.

**WritingThreeSixty:** You come from a family of authors and your mother [Dot Serfontein] is a famous Afrikaans writer. Growing up, did you know you wanted to be a writer?

**Antjie:** I have kept a diary since I was very young. I wrote down useless things that happen with you when you are six or seven years old. I suppose it had more to do with a desire to have secrets and to have those secrets articulated. Then, when I was ten years old, my grandmother died and it was the first funeral I attended. I found it fascinating. I saw my parents crying, uncles and aunts crying; yet I did not cry. I have her name, Anna Elizabeth, and I loved her, but I think maybe I did not quite understand what was happening. But that evening, I wrote and described the whole funeral in the diary. After a month or so, I paged back and I read that piece on the funeral, and I cried. I think maybe, at that stage, I realised the power of words and the power of being able to articulate such a thing that you can recall emotions. That you can get back emotions that you felt. I realised then that I was actually crying at the funeral. But my writing side was observing so acutely that I could cry about it only after writing it down. So that mixture was a very powerful stimulant for me, for my writing.

I have to say the notion of success was a strange notion in my time. Although my mother was a writer, we did not regard her as successful in today's terms. She wrote, she did interesting things, but it was always very clear that there was no money; there was no glamour involved. It was for the satisfaction of being able to articulate something well. I guess what I am saying is that, when I think of success, I think of the success of a poem. Does this poem succeed in expressing as close as possible what I want to say?

**WritingThreeSixty:** What is your greatest achievement thus far?

**Antjie:** One is very aware of the contamination around all these so-called achievements. I have received many prizes, but you know that they are all linked to who is on the judging panel or who won last year, who is writing with you, how old they are, their gender, their race, all of that. In the end, there are so many arbitrary things around any kind of achievement that I do not pay any heed to achievement, to the notion of achievement.

Basically, writing is the only thing that I do reasonably well. Even in terms of personal success. I do not think I am a good mother or teacher or wife or person. You just see your failings. You just see what you do not do right. Life in itself is fraught with failure. Even if you do something well, it could still be done better. Yet, life is also wonderful, and one is glad that one lives.

**WritingThreeSixty:** *Country of My Skull* has been widely published and was later made into a film entitled, *In My Country*. What was it like for you, as the author, to have your book made into a film? And what did you think of it at the time?

**Antjie:** When they approached me about the film, I immediately thought that the story was not mine, but that it was a South African story. I had no right to say you must involve me and I get to say how it is made and control it, because it is not my story. Then, in many ways, the film has been very disappointing, and sometimes I think I should have demanded more control over it. But, as I said, it was not my story.

**WritingThreeSixty:** What book do you wish you could have written, and do you still want to write and publish?

**Antjie:** My publishing career started when I was seventeen. I am now sixty-three. It is a long career. So, when you are at my age, you begin to think it is time to shut up. Life in South Africa, as it is happening right now, should be told by people from a different generation, people with technical skills, people with different life experiences, young people. It is time for people like me to say the terrain is now a terrain of others. So, I suppose, if I wrote something more, I would be pleased and surprised. I think academic writing I will still do, because in many ways, it is so safe. The academics will not like me saying that. Academic life is safe.

**WritingThreeSixty:** At the Franschhoek Literary Festival (FLF) in May, you spoke to Alexander Matthews about your new collection *Mede-wete / Synapse*. It is said that this is your first new collection in eight years. Why the time gap? Did it take eight years to write?

**Antjie:** In the past ten years, I have been doing several other things, like working with Professor Ratele and Mrs Nosisi Mpolweni on *There Was This Goat*. I wrote *Begging to Be Black*. I wrote a whole book of academic essays titled, *Conditional Tense: The Question of Identity after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. So I was doing other writing.

The other answer is that I did not know how to write about now. I felt I had to intellectually engage with a new vocabulary and a new way of putting a volume together. It was also about: How do I say the things I said in *Begging to be Black* and the things I worked out in academic essays? How do I translate that into poems? It took me a long while to work that out.

**WritingThreeSixty:** In the discussion with Alexander Matthews, you also mentioned that the last section of this collection is, and I quote: “the biggest risk I’ve ever taken as a poet”. How and why is this so?

**Antjie:** I tried to devise a new language to encompass the philosophical undertone that is part of the first part of the collection. In making new words, and in ignoring syntax, and in transgressing all grammatical rules, you take risks. One of the risks is that you become completely incomprehensible. There is something not always bad about incomprehensibility. As long as something is there that you can hang onto, that can pull you, and it becomes a kind of audio experience. So you hear a lot of things that you do not understand. But somehow you understand something. But the danger, of course, is that the small thing that you can hang onto can break and people could just find it gibberish, garbage. The other risk is that you perhaps do it in Afrikaans because you can make an argument for Afrikaans. I think that the same argument could apply to English, that English is also a language in which oppression and horror have been committed. So it can also perhaps do with a new distortion. But I have not heard English people saying that. So that is another risk; it is an ideological risk.

**WritingThreeSixty:** You are from Kroonstad, and in this collection of poetry, you pay homage to your place of birth. As a writer, why is it important to write about home and one’s homeland?

**Antjie:** I do not necessarily think it is important to write about your home, but in this case, I wanted to start actually from the place where everything went wrong. So I begin on the farm, in the yard, in the home where you thought everything was okay. But it turned out to be very wrong. The root of all wrongness.

**WritingThreeSixty:** This collection is deeply personal for you, as you write about where you grew up and the passing of your father. Why did you decide to share these personal accounts of childhood and family life with your readers?

**Antjie:** I think one needs to make a distinction between private details and what is taken up in literature. You can say it is about the death of my father. But if, in the poem, it does not become more than a poem about my father, then the poem has failed. So it must become more. It must become a metaphor for something else. The farm, the yard, the home in the Afrikaner community – and most other communities – is patriarchal. So the volume opens with the death of the father, the death of the patriarch. It ends – that whole yard section – it ends with the death of Mandela, which is the death of the political patriarch.

So all of those things are chosen to say more than the personal. But because they are the personal, my power over them is much greater. If I write about your mother or your father, whom I do not know, I do not have that much power. I can look at photographs, I can interview them, I can interview you, etcetera, and I can imagine. But with my personal story, I have power over my surroundings. But maybe someone can write better about my parents than I can. But when you write about the personal, it just has so much more

power. That is why young writers are often encouraged to begin to write about the things that they know well, because then they would have power over it. But it must, in the end, become more than just the personal. My experience has taught me that the more accurately you describe the person, the more universal it becomes.

**WritingThirtySixty:** Do you have a favourite line or quote from the collection? You also mentioned something about a distortion of language, a new language and “syllable disturbances”, which is an interesting concept. Could you explain that and provide some examples of it from the collection?

**Antjie:** I have many lines that I like because they represent for me intense energy captured with unusual sound. For example:

“the pelvis tilts like a songbrewed slave of light;  
from behind he starts to freefall into the endlessness of her neck  
she lifts her chin distant terebinths and calligraphy  
the line of her lower jaw feasts on stars.  
I am an aqueduct alarmed with happiness,  
one foot firmly planted on gold, the other  
athwart the land while one hand takes  
the other claws from the unbuttoned fly  
dangle Baron Boerdick, Viscount Saltdick  
and their mate the Duke of Acordnick.”

One of the most important words was the title *Mede-wete*, the Afrikaans title, because it does not have an English translation. It took me a long time to get to an Afrikaans title. Most of the lines have to do with sound. There are also examples of changing one syllable, such as “bewinterment”, which recalls both bewilderment and to be affected by winter, “godness” which recalls goddess, and “eyenibs” which recalls something soft, like eyelids, and something harsh, like “eyenibs”.

**WritingThirtySixty:** What are the poems about, and what are the central themes in *Mede-wete / Synapse*?

**Antjie:** The essence of the volume is its title. “Fellow consciousness” is actually the literal translation. It means that we are connected in various known and, especially, unknown ways with human beings, with nature, with everything. I explore and interrogate that through the yard section. The yard then becomes not only a place of the father and injustice, but also it becomes a place of stars. A place of trees, a place of politics, a place of grandchildren and happiness, a place of hunger and death. And, especially, a place of failing to live up to or experience or honour this connectedness. The last part is an attempt to find a new language in the hope that this will bring you closer.

**WritingThreeSixty:** At the FLF 2015 discussion, you said that “poetry is the answer”, and that everything you know in life, you have been taught through poetry, for instance “how to live and how to grieve”. What does poetry mean to you? And why is it the answer?

**Antjie:** Good poetry intensifies one’s experiences. So, if you read the right poems and you come across good poems, they assist you in intensifying how you see spring, how you see winter, how you love, how you grieve, all that. The way in which I have experienced life, I have learnt that through poetry.

**WritingThreeSixty:** What are you working on now? What is your next project?

**Antjie:** I am one of three judges of an African poetry competition. They apparently have received 2 000 poems from across the continent. It is organised by a Ugandan writer, Beverley Nambozo Nsengiyunva, the founder of Babishai Niwe Poetry Foundation. It was previously a Poetry Award for Ugandan women, but now includes all African poets and runs as an annual poetry award.

**For more information on *Mede-wete / Synapse* (2014), published by Human & Rousseau, visit the site: [www.humanrousseau.com](http://www.humanrousseau.com). The book is available for purchase from Graffiti Boeke for R200.00.**

Interview by Bronwyn Douman

Editor: Martina van Heerden

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