

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDRE BRINK

WORLDVIEW: Your title, *A Chain of Voices*, obviously reflects the novel's multiple first-person narrative technique. But no doubt you had a good deal more in mind. What, specifically?

ANDRE BRINK: Yes, the structure of *Voices* is actually a series of monologues. The point is these people cannot talk to each other but, rather, constantly talk *past* one another. I originally wrote *Voices* in both English and Afrikaans, so that in the middle of the novel the characters were literally speaking two different languages. It's my own special version, not for publication.

All the characters are slaves of the situation, whites and blacks alike—slaves of history, slaves of the land, slaves of their condition.

Is it the case that more South Africans are writing fiction today, or is it that more South African novels are being published in the U.S.? In either event, why the surge in American interest in South African fiction?

Probably American houses are publishing more South African literature than in the past. But all of the authors we speak of today—Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, Es'kia Mphahlele, and so on—have been published for years, some as far back as the '50s. And all of us have in fact been published in the United States for some while, though with relatively little attention. I think Americans have just not been noticing.

I think the [James] Michener phenomenon has something to do with it. He spends six weeks in South Africa and writes an epic of the land, *The Covenant*. It now has to be seen if Americans will take this as the definitive word. It would be a shame if they did. On the other hand, it might have stimulated more interest.

Personally, my great worry about the South African literary scene is that there are so few of us writers. We can be counted on your fingers.

In a Worldview review of Alan Paton's newest novel, Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful, the South African critic and scholar Lewis Nkosi refers to the hero of Cry, the Beloved Country, the Reverend Kumalo, as a kind of "Uncle Tom"; and he cites Paton's "essentially paternalistic view of Africans." Do you share this perception, and if so, has it changed in the thirty-four years since the publication of Cry?

I think I could basically agree with that evaluation, though I am skeptical of Nkosi on Paton. I know Lewis quite well, and he has always been angry with Paton over the Liberal party. Yes, it's paternalistic, and if written today, it would be unbearably so. But I think the times required such an approach, much as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* spoke of the America of the last century.

One reason for the change in approach is the increasing number of black writers who eloquently and startlingly interpret the black African experience. Thirty-four years ago black writers had to rely on white writers to find a voice. Today no white writer would attempt to act as a spokesman for blacks. The 1950s saw a marked increase in the number of black writers, but they were banned in the '60s. Not only were their works prohibited from publication, but *they* were banned—not a word of them could be quoted.

Much fine talent was destroyed. Nat Nakasa committed suicide in New York; Can Themba drank himself to death in Swaziland. Others of the same generation continued to write in exile.

Nkosi has accused me of wrongly attempting to write about blacks; but a writer must have the freedom to imagine what someone else is like. The essential human experience cannot be divided into black and white. Living together with a common oppressor, the South African Gov-

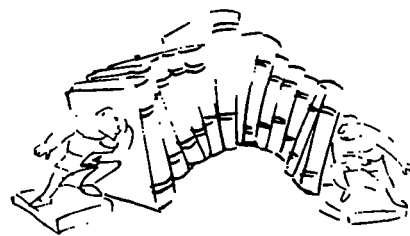
Herzog and his *verkrampes* ten years ago. Unlike Herzog, Treurnicht is no relic, and the conditions for an Afrikaner opposition are far more auspicious now than a decade ago.

The author of *Voices* represents an Afrikaner defector of a decidedly different and more ominous kind when seen from the perspective of a government that has determined that change will take place only under the most controlled conditions. Such disciplined change requires the solid support of the Afrikaans-speaking community, yet this consensus clearly is threatened by the small but expanding group of Afrikaner intellectuals and clerics on the Left and the new Conservative party of the Right—the former wanting great and more comprehensive change, the latter wanting no change at all. From Prime Minister Botha's point of view the stand-patters represent rigidity

at a time when change is required, but the liberals seem to give evidence of a failure of will and a disposition to doubt the eternal verities of Boer nationalism. This is far more unsettling because it signals an embrace of outlander values by a segment of God's elect.

The reformism of Botha is evidence of a desire to rectify South Africa's melancholy history of race relations while not becoming immobilized by the enormity of the historical injustices or being seduced by sentimental liberalism. Brink's novel, with its evocation of a bleak and violent past, is at odds with that view. Yet for all its somberness, it is no testament of despair. In its perceptive and sensitive depiction of human relationships, *A Chain of Voices* tells us that, even in the most benighted of times, there was common ground in South Africa for all races. Outsiders may see South Africa as a static tableau

of cardboard figures in fixed and hostile positions. But this image for all its satisfying simplicity never has been accurate. If André Brink's novel receives the attention it deserves, it will lacerate many consciences. If it sensitizes those in a position to bring about change, leading them to broaden and extend the scope of reform, it will be seen to have not only literary merit but political and social importance as well. [WV]



ernment, white and black authors have been driven together in an exciting way. This experience of a brotherhood of writers led to a predominantly black PEN center in South Africa for a number of years, with wonderful results. Sadly, black writers came under great pressure to separate themselves from white writers, being accused of selling out.

For the black writer the motive is revolution and reform. They must be able to function within the black society. Happily, though, there remains strong contacts between all writers, black and white.

Some of your own works have been banned in South Africa. Paton has been placed under house arrest. Clearly there are impediments to literary expression in South Africa. How extensive are they, how successful, and how do writers and other artists circumvent or overcome them?

This is a terribly complex situation. First of all, one must accept that literary censorship is but one part of the oppressive machinery. When people are banished, it's a form of censorship. When one is held without trial, it is a form of censorship.

But given that, it is certainly true that South African writers operate under difficult circumstances, and blacks have a much more difficult time than whites. The government can detain a black writer for weeks or months simply to break his spirit. The result, however, is usually an even greater determination to carry on writing.

Since I began writing books with a political dimension, I have been carefully watched. I'm followed, even abroad; my mail is opened; my house searched; my typewriters confiscated. If writing means not an escape from action but an immersion into action, then you accept these things.

What do you think of exile as an alternative? Can the South African author function well and honestly outside his native land?

It is impossible to make a hard rule saying we must stay in a country. Look at Mann and Brecht in Germany—or Nkosi in South Africa, who was completely banned, not allowed to set a word on paper.

Necessity aside, I think one pays an enormous price as an exile. I've always found it a heart-rending experience to see writers fatally tied to a society and wasting away in a foreign country. They seem to draw no sustenance from their adopted land, sucking dry the experience they grope at through memory. Some overcome this, but for many it is a continuous downhill slide.

If, as in America, you live where you have the whole alphabet of human experience available to you, it doesn't much matter which letter you choose. But when one chooses to write about that which is taboo, it acquires the weight of an action. There is an electrical charge. The South African author needn't go in search of a theme; it is already there!

As an Afrikaner, I and others came in for very stiff censorship—not as much as blacks, but far more than authors of British descent.

As an author, do you move toward something in your art? In other words, do your social motives—and clearly they exist—have some particular direction, some ultimate end?

This is very dangerous territory. However socially active I am, writing is a very private activity. It's only when I start working on paper that I can develop my thoughts.

If my aim were to get the system of apartheid changed as quickly as possible, I'd have become a politician or a guerrilla. The fact that one chooses to become a writer implies that one aims at something quite different.

A change in the political system would matter little unless there is a change in the sensibilities of the people who must live in that society. This is where I am working—in the minds of individuals. W.V.

PASSING THE TIME IN BALLYMENONE

by Henry Glassie

(University of Pennsylvania Press; 852 pp.; \$29.95)

Maureen Waters

The critic John Wilson Foster once observed that the Irish preoccupation with place is a "preoccupation with the past" without which the self is "apparently inconceivable." This theme is familiar to readers of Irish literature. Its broader cultural implications are brilliantly explored by Henry Glassie in *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*.

A small farming community in County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland, Ballymenone comprises forty-two households that, despite religious differences, are closely bound because of their sense of belonging to a particular

place rich in history and tradition. Glassie spent approximately ten years gathering and assimilating material, recording conversations and stories, living with the people of Ballymenone, and so coming to understand and appreciate their way of life. His account offers a splendid compilation of story and song, dialogue, photographs and drawings of the people, their homes, their farming implements, their serene and beautiful landscape. History, as well as the present-day conflict in Ulster, has given these people little ground for optimism, but they have survived poverty and exhausting physical labor with an abiding sense of faith, dignity, and humor.

In Ballymenone literacy is considered a "marginal convenience"; all important exchanges are conducted orally and face to face. Details of history, genealogy, land tenure, arrange-

ments between farmers, rules of the Church—"all are held in memory." There is consequently a great hatred of lies. The people will tell you that the tongue is "the worst instrument," the "most destructive of the soul." Used maliciously, it warps the social bond.

Central to this way of life is the *ceili*, the gathering at a neighbor's house to share food, conversation, the old stories and songs. It is their way of entertainment, of keeping alive the neighborly ethic, of confirming traditional values. In a community where knowledge is "heritage," it is natural that the most sought-after storytellers, historians, and musicians turn out to be the elderly, whose memories span several generations.

Compressed in tales of saints and battles, history recalls both critical events in the nation's past and those of local interest, such as the adventures of