

Darryl David Interviews Author Cornelis Britz
Who will be attending this years
Boekbedonnerd 2 Festival



***Big Dan's Sofie* by Keith Cornelis- Britz**
Nominated for EU Literary Award

In the summer of 2006, after writing about my travels to Arniston in *The Witness*, I received an e- mail from a total stranger who wanted to talk to me . Curiously, I agreed and we met after my lecture at the local campus of UKZN. There I saw a pony-tailed gentleman of an age where men should not have pony tails, looking as if he was waiting for someone.

“Keith?”, I ask, and extend my hand sheepishly. We shake hands. He explains that in my article I said I went to Arniston on the strength of book royalties, and wanted to know if I could help him publish his book. “ Just read it and tell me what you think”, he said before I could protest my book was a mere school textbook.

And so he handed me “ Sofie van Groot Daan” on disc. I liked the book so much so that I invited Keith to our opening of Book Town Richmond . Maybe sharing the stage with Patrick Mynhardt was too intimidating, and Keith declined the invitation. I told Keith to approach a publisher that shall remain unnamed. After a few months, a dead end. Then he approached another publisher during last years Cape Town Book Fair. After weeks of flirtation, they dumped him. Early this year, I saw an advert by Jacana Press calling for manuscripts from first time authors for the prestigious EU Literary Awards. I phoned Keith and told him to enter.

In the glory of late- autumn May, I switch on my computer and see an e- mail from Keith. Phone me urgently!!! With tears in my eyes, I hear from Keith that the English translation of Sofie van Groot Daan was shortlisted for the **EU LITERARY AWARD**. His was one of five shortlisted from almost 50 manuscripts.

DD : Keith, tell us a bit about the book

KB : The story revolves around Sofie, a singularly un-pretty Afrikaner girl whose prospects of marriage, according to the community in which she lived, were nil. She starts off working at a local hotel, and then went to work for Big Dan when his wife became too ill to look after her home and children. Maybe I should not give more away, except to say that the story deals with the theme of the poor Afrikaner and the woodcutting days in Olifantshoek, near Wilderness.

DD : Tell us a bit more about how you came to choose this setting.

KB : Olifantshoek, or Hoekwil as it is now known, lies some 4 km inland from Wilderness. It is situated on some low foot hills of the Outeniqua mountain range. It was then a very small village made up of smallholdings. Time had passed it by and it was only electrified in the mid 1980's while I lived there. The house I lived in was set in a pine forest and to the South I looked over the Indian Ocean. The house itself was of asbestos prefab construction and when it rained I stood ankle deep in water. There was no hot water and so I rigged a shower at the back of the house. For almost 7 years, summer and winter, I showered under the open sky in cold water. A strange yet fun time. It was during this time that I got to know the people and a seldom spoken of past of the poor Afrikaner, very similar to Dalene Mathee's 'bos' novels. In this novel, I try to tell the stories that 'Tant Elsie' told me when I lived in the community. And I try to be faithful to the idiom of the stories told to me, which was quite easy in Afrikaans, but a real challenge in the English translation.

DD : You seem to have lead a very colourful life. Is this a fair summation ?

KB : The greater part of my working life was as a medical rep. Initially it was the Eastern Cape world of Fort Beaufort, Bedford, Cradock, Graaff- Reinet; then the Northern Cape world of Richmond, De Aar, Hanover. And then the interesting world of the N.Cape bordering Namibia. What wonderful names - Pofadder, Putsonderwater, Garies, Koekenaap, Granaatboskolk. It was a eight and a half year period, but a very special one where I got to meet some of the nicest country Doctors. Whatever wanderlust I had was satisfied during this time.

DD ; What are your links with Pietermaritzburg , Keith

KB : They were eight and a half all told. I moved down to PMB when I finally retired. I needed to supplement my pension and so I did what I had been doing for some years - painting fabric and then selling the garments I made out of it at the local and wider KZN craft markets. It was a wonderful way to meet the people of PMB and through the markets I made so many friends. Later, as the markets went into decline, I , together with 2 friends, started a Tea Garden in Cramond where I was living. It was during this time that I woke one morning with a very strong impression that I had to re- look at the manuscript of a novel I had written in Afrikaans 20 years earlier.

DD : Can you tell us a bit about the genesis of the book over 20 years ago.

KB : It was during the spring of 1985 that I was walking a friends two Collies and my two dogs on the beach below Holiday Inn in Wilderness. It was a soft spring day as I recall, with the waves lapping the beach and a warm spring sun above me, set in a pale blue sky. My mind was in neutral just enjoying the feel of spring and the sand under my feet. In this state of near meditation I saw a scene in my minds eye which startled me. I had no idea where it came from or what it was meant to be. I tried to put it out of my mind, but it persisted. A week later I decided that perhaps it was some sort of short story.

Once I started writing I couldn't stop. Characters popped into my mind, named themselves, and a story began to unfold. That 'vision' was the opening sequence of the book that became Sofie van Groot Daan (Big Dan's Sofie)

DD : What does it feel like to live with a book that friends said was memorable, but turned down by every publisher, until now.

KB : When it was rejected by an Afrikaans publisher circa 1986, it was on the grounds that they had a writer of the S.Cape in the very formidable form of Dalene Mathee. But just being compared to that writer made me keep the manuscript.

But let me add that I am an extremely unambitious person. For me to have written this manuscript (call it a novel, Keith!) was an achievement. That gave me a sense of fulfillment. Then so many of my friends read the manuscript and reacted to it in so many positive ways. That stunned me. Also so many could remember specifics of the story years after reading it, which suggested to me that it left more than a passing impression. Yes, deep within me I believed in the work- at a level that is beyond the grasp of the rational mind. Being rejected by publishers did not concern me. I knew the time had to be right for the novel to be published and was prepared to wait. I understood that in the Afrikaner community there was still a lot of baggage, and that many on the panels that read the novel

might have been reminded of where they came from - and were not yet ready to face the fact that their forebears also had a “struggle” but not for flashy cars and highly paid jobs for which they were not trained. This to my mind is the true “struggle”. Without preaching, it is something that I wanted to highlight - for the discerning reader.

DD : If you win Keith ...

KB : If I win - wow, wouldn't that be something. I would like to take the story into a possible trilogy that follows Peet and John, and then finally Hardus's story.

I am at present working on two other manuscripts-the one completely different, and a book of short stories taken from my actual life experiences.

DD : Your life seems to be segmented into eight and a half year stints, so maybe we have lost you to the Mother City for a while yet. Congratulations on finally getting the recognition for a compelling novel after 25 long years. You, to me, exemplify that wonderful phrase : THE AUDACITY OF HOPE!!! All the best for the finals. Oh, and did I mention I have not been to Arniston since our first meeting...