



The New Richmond Reader

May 2012



Your Literary News from the Heart of the Karoo

As the winds are ever cooler and the nights even cold enough to warrant an extra mohair blanket or quilt; the turning of the leaves heralds the onset of fall and winter in the Karoo heartland, and with this the 2nd Annual JM Coetzee and Nobel Laureates Festival which will be taking place on the 25th and 26th of May. A Booktown Richmond newsletter which accompanies this 4th Issue of the NRR will include the latest programme and other information for your interest.

Once again the New Richmond Reader has a couple of very good short stories including one from Canadian penman Fred Stenson, who has written on some insights into his visit to BoekBedonnerd III a few years ago. Fred got a real bang out of his visit to the Karoo and South Africa in general and when I visited him in Calgary recently he said that he was pining for a return. This may be sooner than he expected, as his novel, which was the reason for his invitation in 2010, *The Great Karoo*, is going to be made into a feature movie funded 50:50 by Canadian and South African backers. Fred's story appears in the Canadian Literary Magazine EIGHTEEN BRIDGES, with which we are in the process of engaging, in order to broaden our reader and writer base.



As always we look forward to receiving your literary submissions and we hope that you enjoy this issue of The New Richmond Reader.

A Cry In The Night

By Keith Britz

We had just finished our supper when the storm hit. A Free State cloud burst. The wind screamed at the building, howling through the pine trees, while the rain hit the building with a severity that threatened to destroy it and lightning flashed turning night into day. Thunder rounded off the cacophony.

We had moved in at the beginning of the month. It was a relatively new block of flats at the foot of Signal Hill in Bloemfontein and right next to the municipal swimming baths. A joy for us was being able to watch the buck that grazed on the other side of the game fence.

I was standing at the window watching the storm grateful that I wasn't out in it. Then I heard it. A wail. A sound so intense that it rose above the storm and knotted my solar plexus. It was repeated again and again, there came a loud crash and then all went quiet. I stood there tense waiting for something to happen. I was sure the sound came from next door. I went to the front door, opened it, meaning to go and see if there was anything I could help with. But in the few seconds the door was open I was completely drenched and I quickly shut the door. I decided to wait until the storm eased. It didn't and we went to bed the storm still raging.

The next morning I woke to a clean, bright washed day. Yet the sound of the wail still lingered in my memory and disturbed me. I stood in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil when I heard the front door open next door. Paul walked past the window and waved to me and I nodded back. I took my coffee out into the balcony corridor and waited for Paul to return. When he saw me he hesitated and then walked towards me.

"What happened? Are you all OK?"

He nodded. "I can't talk now, must help Uncle Herman – but we will talk. It's a long story. You should know in case it happens again."

Paul shrugged his shoulders, turned and walked into their flat.

When we moved in Uncle Herman a German immigrant and his wife, Anna, a Prussian were very kind to us. They came over with a supper for us and in their broken English welcomed us. Later in the evening Paul, their nephew, arrived with a strudel and introduced himself. He also brought some fresh filter coffee and asked if he could be of any assistance. As we were relatively newlyweds there was not all that much to unpack so we invited Paul to join us and we sat and ate the strudel and drank the coffee. Paul told us that he was working as a piano tuner even though he had been trained as a concert pianist at the Berne Conservatoire. He was Swiss and spoke a good but accented English. He had immigrated to South Africa after the war and at his prompting his Uncle and Step-aunt also came. He told us that even though this was the 60's things in Europe still were very tough. He had battled to earn a living as a concert pianist and so he had nothing to lose.

"May I ask, what happened last night?" I asked.

"It is such a sad story," he said, "When a storm like last night hits then Tant Anna goes completely mad and we have to lock her in the small bedroom or else she will destroy the flat. She goes completely crazy."

"But why?"

"That's a long story. Goes back to when she was a prisoner of war in Siberia."

There was a knock on the door and Uncle Herman apologised for interrupting but could Paul please come and help him. Anna had to have her medication and she would only accept it from Paul.

During the months that followed we were told the story bit by bit and when someone recently asked me if I had seen Schindler's List the events of that night came back as fresh as if it had just happened. When Judgement at Nuremburg was released early in the 60's I went to see it. In the movie there were newsreel clips of what the allies found when they went into the concentration camps, and those clips gave me nightmares. So much so that for almost six weeks I couldn't sleep. I walked until I was too tired to stay awake then I would go home for a few hours of disturbed sleep.

Anna's first husband had been a general in the Wehrmacht, but he was one of a group of generals who strongly advised Hitler to use circumspection and caution in his military planning. As a result he, and others like him, were posted to the Eastern front where there was very little military activity. Then in a skirmish with the Russians he was captured and not long after she was taken prisoner and shipped to Moscow. Somehow they discovered that she was the wife of a captured general and she was incarcerated in the dreaded Lubyanka. The terrible conditions in the cattle truck, the stench of no sanitation, very little food, people dying where they sat or lay and the ever present cold in no way prepared her for what lay ahead. In the bowels of Treblinka she was put into isolation. She spoke no Russian and her guards no German, so there was no communication and her days were marked by the switching on and turning off of the light in her cell.

How long this continued she didn't know. Then one morning when the lights came on, they came for her. And her interrogation began. She had in the meantime lost complete track of the passage of time. During her interrogation she seemed to be there for minutes before being taken back to her cell then there were times it felt like days. The bright light in her face, the interrogator in darkness, nothing to eat or drink while she was there, the physical violence that seemed to come out of nowhere and the same questions repeated over and over. All the while she wondered what they wanted to know. What could she, a sidelined General's wife know?

The interrogation stopped and she almost missed it. At least during the interrogation there were living breathing beings in the room with her. Once it stopped there was no-one. Her guards she heard behind her locked door but saw only when she was allowed to empty her slops bucket which she judged to be once a week. Then for twenty four hours the smell in her cell was passable.

Then they came for her again except this time they did not take her to the regular interrogation room. They walked for what seemed like miles down corridors and up stairs. Finally they came to a door, they waited for it to be opened and when it was she was pushed through it. Hands grabbed her and placed her in front of a table. She stood there trembling. Her legs were wobbling from the exertion of walking such an

unaccustomed distance and she had a strong sense of unease. There was something about the room that scared her. She stood there her eyes cast down. Then there was a riding crop under her chin forcing her head up and there, behind a wall of glass sat her husband. The sight of him came as such a shock that her legs gave way. When she came round she was lying naked on the table. Her thin regulation cotton dress was thrown to one side and as she had had no underwear since her arrival she tried to cover herself with her hands. Her arms were being pinned down. Then she screamed.

When it was over, her body and face was covered in semen. They stood her up, facing the glass but she refused to look at her husband. Then she was marched back to her cell. When they brought her her ration of Russian tea she used the corner of her blanket to clean herself.

She was gang raped over and over again and at varying times. Sometimes it would be the next day and then days would pass when nothing happened and then it would start all over again. She got to a point that when they came for her that her mind just switched off. After that first time she didn't scream again instead she focused on her husband's face. At first the horror in his eyes was unbearable but he too became inured against the scene being played out in front of him.

Then that final day. This time they seated her behind the table so that she faced her husband on the other side of the glass. His eyes were blank and then for a moment they focused on her, he recognised her and tried to smile. A high ranking officer came in and stood behind him. An interrogating officer sat to one side of him talking furiously. She watched. Her husband kept shaking his head. The senior officer stood impassively behind him and then without warning he said something to the interrogating officer who shook his head. He then drew his pistol and shot her husband through the back of his head. She remembered the blood and gore hitting the glass and nothing more.

The first time she had an extended period of lucidity was when she found herself sitting among other women on the back of a troop carrier. The truck was stationary, and the wind howled, the rain hit the canvass covering like a demented deaf drummer then the truck moved forwards only to slide to the one side

and she started screaming. She could not stop herself and then awareness faded. They later told her that her brief periods of lucidity were invariably followed by extended periods of screaming and finally endless sobbing. When she was in that condition she didn't speak, she obeyed orders given, but like a robot. She was also told that they were on their way to Siberia. It was in that truck that the will to live finally won out. Her periods of lucidity became longer and longer and by the time they arrived at the gulag the nightmares were few and far between. Except during those wind driven, rain or ice pelting storms you experience in the arctic regions. Then the thread of rationality snapped and a shrieking madness overcame her. Her barrack mates learnt to tie her to her bed until the storm abated and sanity returned to her.

Then came the years in Siberia where survival became all consuming. The fact that it was always cold did not alter their prison dress. To keep warm they slept around the potbellied stove in the middle of the barracks. They changed places during the night so that everyone had a chance to keep warm. Folded into one another it got them through the worst of nights. Even so there were deaths especially among the younger women they simply seemed to give up.

The rapes continued but it no longer had the impact it originally had but it was after an especially vicious session that the woman would just give up and die during the night. The horror of waking to find the person in front or behind you had died never lessened. Each time a pall settled on the barrack as their numbers decreased.

The daily chores continued except in the worst of weathers. Picking up dung and chopping wood. Despite it being backbreaking work it was the time they could speak to other prisoners. The men felled the trees which were then dragged to the camp by horses. First and foremost the officers had to have their wood piles replenished, then the soldiers and finally the barracks got their ration. It was while they did this that they could speak to women in some of the other barracks. Sometimes when a man became too weak to chop trees in the forest he was assigned to carry the chopped wood to its various destinations. It was from one such man that they learnt that they were well within the Arctic Circle almost on the Bering Sea. He had been a pilot in the Luftwaffe and that was when all

thoughts of escape truly died. They watched him get weaker and weaker and then one morning they saw his naked body outside his barrack. They watched as his body was pulled behind a horse into the forest and left for the wolves.

During the height of winter when the supply trucks couldn't get through, it was the horse dung that saved many from starvation. While cleaning up the horse dung they became adept at sifting through it to find any grain that had not been digested. This they carefully hid. It was washed and added it to the thin soup they were given. Then they cooked it until it was soft. Even pieces of straw were saved and added. The other strenuous work was mucking out the stables. There the women prisoners soon learnt how to steal oats and a careful network developed so that all the barracks benefitted. When there were oats they added it to their soup and the resulting broth was wonderful. But the deaths continued. When there were too many on one night the prisoners had to make a funeral pyre and the bodies were burnt on it. They hated those pyres because it meant they had to work so much harder. It invariably meant that the barracks would be short of fuel which would mean more deaths. It was from the Luftwaffe pilot that they learnt that the rapes were not confined to the women's barracks but that the younger men, and he was one, were subjected to the same treatment.

The one thing they often discussed was why they were so suddenly moved out of Moscow in the dead of night. They had discovered soon after arriving that all those in that barrack had been inmates of Lubyanka. Some had been there for years while others just weeks. They heard later, on the gulag grapevine, that the International Red Cross had been concerned for the female prisoners they maintained were in Lubyanka. The Russian government denied that there were any female prisoners in Lubyanka. Then the Red Cross insisted on an inspection in terms of the Geneva Convention and that was when they were moved.

Very little changed as one season slowly flowed into the next one. It went from cold to freezing and back again. They heard that the war had ended. For a short while there was a hope of being released but the seasons changed and changed again. The years passed, there were fewer deaths and barracks were closed as they moved the inmates out of them to fill spaces in

other barracks which were left by the dead.

One day at inspection they were told that the gulag was to be closed down completely and that they were all to be moved. Fear ripped through the camp. They had heard of the death squads and of early morning massacres. Of all the time they spent in the gulag that was the hardest. The uncertainty of their position weighed heavily on them. Anna said what troubled her more than death squads was the break with the routine that had become a way of life for more than a decade. What would she find out there? Who would look after her? That fear weighed heavily on her. She guessed that others were feeling exactly as she did but they couldn't bring themselves to talk about it.

And then the trucks arrived and they left. They guessed that they were moving due West but what their destination was going to be they had no idea. One woman recognised the outskirts of Leningrad and hope flared. There in a shed on the docks they were registered by the Red Cross and were given clothes. That evening they boarded a troopship.

I couldn't help smiling at the look on Anna's face when she described having that first hot shower, being able to wash her hair with carbolic soap to kill the lice that infected it and to scrub her body until it hurt was the closest thing to heaven she had experienced here on earth. To feel clean once more. Then she went into raptures about pulling up her first pair of bloomers since being captured, the joy of a soft silky petticoat, a warm woollen dress and a coat. She still had them and insisted on showing them to me. From what she said I expected to see something very special but what she showed me was coarse and ugly. Only then could I begin to truly appreciate something of the hardships she had endured. Then she went on to say that within an hour of donning her new clothes most of it came off. Her body had so acclimatised to the cold that she began to sweat so the coat came off first, then the petticoat and once she had washed her prison dress she put it back on. She said that her friends had exactly the same experience. So the new clothes were put into the small cardboard suitcase that each had been given which also contained a change of clothes. She smiled ruefully and said that no Dior or Chanel creation could have made them feel better.

They disembarked in Hamburg. There again the

International Red Cross took charge. Names, places of birth and last residence were taken. They had a wall with list upon list of names of people who had died or were missing and they went through the lists for hours. One by one family members names appeared on the lists and a fatalistic gloom settled on the group of women. Then they were told that the Red Cross in Berlin had more comprehensive lists as they were updated on a daily basis. So Anna decided that she had to get to Berlin. The Red Cross had supplied each with a small amount of money. Anna was too scared to use this so she decided to walk to Berlin. It was a long walk. Sometimes a farmer would let her ride on his cart and allow her to stay over in his barn at night. Once an Allied troop carrier stopped and gave her a ride, a long one, as they saw the Red Cross on the suitcase she was carrying. Finally she made it to Berlin. She spent days going over the lists there, sleeping in bombed out ruins and gratefully eating meals the Red Cross provided. One by one members of her family and that of her husband's appeared on the lists. Finally there was no-one else to search for. Then despair set in. Blacker than anything she had ever experienced before. For days she couldn't eat and wandered up and down bombed out streets. Mindless of where she was until on a partially demolished storefront she saw the name Madeleine. Then she remembered her father's youngest sister, not many years older than she was. She searched the lists for her name but couldn't find it. Anna knew she had married and had only a faint and uncertain memory of her married name. But as far as she could ascertain her name wasn't on the list and she decided to set off to Bremen where Madeleine had moved after she was married.

Another long walk. During the walk Anna remembered the name of the street on which Madeleine had lived but could not bring to mind the house's number. Even if she had remembered the number, she found once she got there, that very few of buildings were more than just shells. She needed to find a place to sleep and finally found a house with one room that was not totally destroyed. She decided to live there until she could find out if Madeleine still lived or had died.

She began clearing some of the rubble on the floor so that she could have a level area to sleep on when she heard a noise behind her. In the doorway there stood a youngish woman with an iron rod in her hand.

She raised the rod menacingly and pointed to the street. Then the moment froze as recognition dawned on them. She slowly lowered the iron bar and hesitantly said – Anna?

Then they were embracing and tears of joy flowed. The first healing cry since she was incarcerated in Lubyanka. Madeleine got Anna registered so that she could get a ration card and Anna's stay in Bremen began.

After her house was bombed Madeleine moved into the basement and had been living there for years. Her husband and only son were both killed on the Western front. They kept themselves busy by clearing some of the rubble in and around the house and that was how Anna got to know other women who were living in similar conditions on that street. Then the word got round that a Russian troopship would be docking the following day. So they all went down to the docks, so many hoping to find a loved one on the ship but the others to rescue the prisoners who would disembark. They stood beyond the barrier and watched the men come down the gangplank. Gaunt skeletal figures bowed and prematurely aged shuffled down and into the Red Cross shed. Later they emerged one by one and were being led away by a woman. Madeleine had told her that the women took the men in and fed and clothed them until they were strong enough to leave. Strong enough to start searching for missing family and friends and that this had become a tradition.

Anna had noticed a man coming down the gangplank. Short bent forward from a prematurely curved spine and painfully thin but it was the despair in his eyes that spoke to her heart. When he came out of the shed she took him by the arm. He looked at her questioningly but didn't say anything – neither did she. Madeleine took his other arm and they walked home.

Herman was very ill for the first four months he was with them. What had seemed to be a cold turned out to be double pneumonia. Anna nursed him through the crisis and back to health. Once he began feeling better they talked for hours. He had also been captured on the Eastern front and sent to a POW camp but as he was only a foot soldier he was of no interest to Russian intelligence. When the war ended they were transferred to a salt mine in Siberia where he spent the ten years before his release.

She accompanied him to the Red Cross to go through those endless lists. One by one the members of his family appeared on the list. Finally he asked the Red Cross to try and locate his brother who at the outbreak of the war was living and working in Switzerland. He was married and had a young son.

Six months later he was informed that they had located the son. He was living with his mother's sister in Berne. They informed him that as far as they could establish the SS had executed his brother and sister-in-law in France where they were helping the underground to get fugitives out of France and into Switzerland. He wrote to Paul and the correspondence flowed between them and finally Paul invited him to join him and his Aunt in Switzerland.

During this time in Bremen a strong bond had developed between Anna and Herman and after careful thought he decided that he just couldn't face leaving Anna behind so he begged off the visit to Switzerland. Paul was insistent and so travel arrangements were made for him and Anna to visit Berne. Once they were there Paul arranged for his Uncle to tune a few rehearsal piano's at the Conservatoire where Paul was working at that time. Herman wasn't sure he could do it. He hadn't practised his profession since before the war but Paul was insistent. So finally he gave in and to his surprise and the satisfaction of the conservatoire he did excellently. This led to more piano's being tuned at the conservatoire and finally the actual concert grands prior to a concert.

Anna and Herman truly enjoyed their stay in Berne and their departure for Bremen was put off time and again. The only awkwardness at the time was that Paul had applied to emigrate to South Africa and his aunt was against this – Herman didn't like the idea at all but said nothing. Herman felt Paul was wasting his years of training at the conservatoire but Paul pointed out that unless you were truly brilliant and had good connections you didn't have a chance of being booked as a concert pianist. He only got requests to accompany visiting singers but little more than that. Anna suspected that it was the death of his parents more than anything else that was the prime motive for him wanting to leave Switzerland. She felt he wanted to put all that behind him and start afresh. When his parents were mentioned he simply walked out of the room or said he didn't want to talk about it.

Then his emigration papers came through.

Herman was a quiet man. He let Anna do the talking but she discovered that in his quiet way he formed very deep attachments and that the thought of losing Paul was causing him great discomfort. Now with Paul's imminent departure Herman became even more withdrawn. He began having nightmares and speaking in his sleep. Paul left. For a year the letters flowed between them and after the first glowing letter from South Africa Herman seemed to be more at ease. Anna and Herman married in Switzerland to make emigration easier and two years later they arrived in Bloemfontein.

One Saturday we were having afternoon tea, what I mean is coffee actually, with Anna, Herman and Paul. To me it seemed as if telling her story had become easier for her. She had just told us about the young German pilot, his rape and his consequent death when I asked what I had been dying to ask for a long time.

"Tant Anna I have wanted to ask you for some time. How do you feel about the Russians? I mean do you hate them?"

She shook her head, shrugged her shoulders and with true Germanic stoicism said in her accented English,

"Das was war."

Bloemfontein's own Dancing Queen

By Rose Willis

An old photograph in a daily newspaper brought the memories dancing back. It transported an old age home resident across the decades to a hot, blustery, October day in Bloemfontein in 1939. As Dolly Wedderburn now sat enjoying the warm sunshine streaming through the window of her room, her toes began to tap, the years fell away and she once again was a feather light fairy, floating across a stage. She watched the dust motes dancing in the filtered sun rays like flecks of gold and she remembered how she too had flitted lightly across many a stage.

The pictures and accompanying article told of restorations which had been completed at Bloemfontein's first Raadsaal in St George's Street. As Dolly looked at the photographs under the heading "then and now", she was once again a cute, curly-headed, 11-years-old, Shirley Temple look alike, nervously sitting on one of those window sills waiting to dance a vitally important ballet exam. It all began when the British Cecchetti Society of Dancing perceived a huge gap between the Grade 3 and the Elementary Teachers' exam. It then introduced a stiff, new Grade 4 exam and phased this in internationally. The Society then had contracted Miss Mary Skeaping to travel the world to test the capabilities of pupils. In South Africa Miss Skeaping was to examine candidates in Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and Bloemfontein to ensure standards and techniques matched the Society's strict requirements.

She started off with "guinea pig rounds" in Bloemfontein. On the appointed day, warm winds wafted across the veld and into town turning the day into a hot, airless, sultry, early-summer scorcher. The candidates, almost all 11-years-old, were neatly attired in ballet togs and tights, which they had been allowed to don inside the historic Raadsaal. The girls, who all felt "immensely privileged", slowly sauntered in, trying to affect an air of careless confidence. They clustered near the windows "in search of a breath of air". There the strict eyes of local teacher, Joyce Smerdon, kept them in control and her stern glances ensured that the "conversational buzz" was kept to a muted level.

The atmosphere inside the room was explosive. Tension mounted each time another pair of long, skinny

rose pink legs, approached. Each pair ended in flat, blunt-tipped toe shoes, which gave the wearer a flat-footed, duck-like walk. In the area around the windows criss-cross ankle ribbons were adjusted, frilly skirts plumped out and a steady, soft "plonk, plonk" staccato echoed about as each girl tested her pointe shoes.

The examiner rose. Silence fell. She shuffled her papers and called the names of the first two candidates. They moved from the rose-pink cluster, ready to dance. One was tall, slender, Nadine Judd, the other, Doris Fisher, had the sylph-like quality of a fairy. Both were scheduled to dance a solo and then perform a duet. They stood by, nerves jangling in anticipation. Behind them soft whispers hissed until the pianist lifted her hands. There was total silence. A cord sounded and like magic Dolly floated lightly onto the stage. The world around her faded and French words, such as glissade, pli  , fouett  , jet  , ronde, tournant, chased each other through her brain as the music and steps took over.

"For the next few minutes I became part of the music. It guided my body, arms, hands and feet. I moved where it told me to go. Around me the world became a faded, out-of-focus, smudge. Then, all too soon, it ended. The music stopped. My right leg automatically slid forward and my arm fluttered gracefully towards it as I took a bow. Then, with a little leap I ran lightly into the wings. Had it gone well? I did not know. Reality flooded back as I stood there gasping for breath. The real world flooded back, the dance was over. The agony of waiting for results had begun. The wind was also back and so was the heat, but somehow the world had changed. I had danced a major exam in front of an international judge and I had survived."

Now in her large comfortable Lazy Boy Dolly almost laughed out loud remembering that little 11-year-old saying: "I'll absolutely die waiting for the results." Dying wasn't so easy. She looked again at the newspaper and smiled softly, smiling as she reading the caption "then and now", this time applying it to herself. That day had been a pivotal point in her rich her life.

Days passed before The Friend appeared with the full story of the ballet exams and the country wide results. Miss Skeaping stated that the standard in South Africa was very high, but added that in Bloemfontein it had

been exceptional. She had seen hundreds of girls performing across the country, she said, but only two candidates really stood out. Their performances had been quite perfect and she had awarded them “honours” – the highest merit that she was able to give. The two were Nadine Judd and Doris Fisher.

In time Nadine went on to become the first soloist with the British Ballet Company, changed her name to Nadia Nerina and attained world fame. Few realize that this internationally acclaimed prima ballerina started her career in Bloemfontein. Dolly’s dreams of becoming a member of an international ballet company were put on hold by the outbreak of World War II. Europe was in turmoil, the shipping lanes were filled with floating mines and it was simply too dangerous to travel. Her father would hear nothing on this subject and it was closed. But, fate had other plans for Dolly and oddly enough they involved two young lads who saw her dance that day.

One was the nine-year-old Japie Human a gifted, child protégé, who had started playing the piano by ear at the age of four. Dolly took his breath away. He was totally entranced. “She was like a dream, a vision, ethereal, delicate, exquisite. She floated like a feather, softly as a cloud, with all the magic of a fairy, across the bland stage floor. She was a glittering white wisp, then here, then there. Her toes seemed not to touch the ground. The fluid flow and excellence of her movements that day remained with me for the rest of my life,” he said. In time Japie Human, became Dolly’s musical soul mate and a life-long friend. He also became a key factor in helping her build up her studios.

The other boy, a friend of a neighbourhood friend, was the typical boy next door, but invisible to Dolly at the time. Accompanied by cousins from the Karoo he’d reluctantly come along to see the dancing. He was recovering from rheumatic fever and in the heat did not feel well, but the sylph-like fairy that flashed here and there on the stage also captivated him. Little did they know it then, but Cupid was already aligning his bow.

Dolly never made it to the British Ballet. She fell in love. The war claimed everyone’s attention. Men were enlisting and woman everywhere were knitting, baking, collecting cigarettes and making up parcels. Dolly helped where she could. Life went on. Dolly went to school, she danced, she attended parties and met

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Then one day a new player stepped on to the stage and caught her eye. Handsome South African Air Force pilot, Ralph Wedderburn, arrived at a dance with a group of Dolly’s friends. She could not believe her eyes – how had that thin, wan, ill-looking young boy turned into this absolute dish. Miracles, it seemed were possible. Magic filled the air as Ralph recognized the little fairy, the dancing ray of sunshine, he’d seen way back in 1939. He invited her to the Wings Parade at 27 Squadron Air School, but Dolly declined, she didn’t want to ruin her perfect school attendance record.

A tense day or two passed as Dolly wondered if she’d ever see him again, but, Ralph was smitten. The beautiful, curly-headed, Doris Fisher, or Dolly as he called her, had stolen his heart. He swore eternal devotion to her and that is exactly she got. Dolly found him kind, caring, comforting, reassuring, a joy to be with, utterly reliable, and unshakably even-tempered.

“Suddenly we realized the magic of love,” said Dolly.

Dolly and Ralph got engaged and were married in a small, quiet, solemn, happy, wonderful ceremony. “It was our day and we wanted it to be very special, very private and ours alone,” said Doll. Theirs was a story of perfect love from that day on until Ralph died. Dreams of Europe faded and Dolly settled down to be a wife and mother, but the call of ballet was too strong.

She set up studios across the province and danced into the record books as one of the most prolific ballet teachers in South Africa. She became a legend in her own time and spent almost half a century in the world of teaching and ballet schools. Dolly’s proudest joy was seeing the hundreds of potential young dancers realize their dreams and win “championships galore”. During her magnificent career she guided 52 girls to become fully proficient, qualified dancing teachers. Without a doubt she was a Dancing Queen.

Poetry

WILLIAM HENRY LIPSETT

THE SHEPHERD OF THE KARROO

Lean, wizened, wiry, short, of pygmy growth,
 With coat all patchy, veld-skoens worse for wear;
 Bold restless eyes, that seem for ever loath
 To wander from the charges in his care.
 Sole relic of a once freebooting race
 That tilled no fields, exhibited no flocks,
 And passing thenceforth, left among the rocks
 Strange records, time could not efface.
 Now shepherd turned, with cunning as of old,
 Taught in a school that learning never knew;
 To foil the wily jackal grown bold,
 With some old trick of strategy anew.
 True child of nature. Keeper of the fold
 That dots the ranges of the lone Karroo.

AFTER VISITING A BUSHMAN'S CAVE

Summer has come, and sunshine bathes the earth,
 Waking in nature's soul a deep, responsive mood.
 Yet to this caverned vault no sounds intrude
 And stifled is the music and the mirth.
 Only the constant drip of water from the roof
 Falls strikingly upon the attentive ear;
 Filling the soul with some vague nameless fear,
 'Gainst which the cult of wisdom is not proof.
 For centuries dim lie hidden and confined
 Within the limits of this narrow space,
 Whose walls bear witness to the first defined
 If crude outpourings of a vanished race,
 Reaching a moment to an art sublime,
 The next engulfed, within the sea of time.

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Books are for reading, aren't they?

By Darrel Conolly

THERE IS A DEEP-FROZEN DORP just off the N1 roughly halfway between Johannesburg and Cape Town, and it is here that, in sober mind, I chose to spend what have subsequently turned out to be over five generally dreary, yet at times, highly diverting years of my life.

I use the adjective 'deep-frozen' for good reason, as it is here that thousands of Joburg Jollers, en route to their annual reunion in the Cape, dread being caught for speeding, or worse still, having their cars break down on them. And quite understandably so; for a week spent here whilst awaiting the arrival of a car part as a self-taught grease-monkey with two left hands and a No 58 spanner tinkers with your Lamborghini, doesn't exactly fill you with confidence. Neither does it live up to the offerings on Fourth Beach over the festive season, nor even those of Addington Beach at any time of the year, so frozen in time is the place. Yet for reasons I have yet to establish, the denizens of the dorp believe they are in seventh heaven; the logic, I suppose, being that having experienced heavens one to six during their working lives, they have finally arrived in paradise. It happens to the elderly, you know.

Having in years gone by thrown all my toys from my cot and set forth on a desultory twenty-four-month walkabout which took me physically no further than my local pub and mentally into the world of Tele Tubbies, I moved to Richmond - the dreaded Karoo dorp that slumbers in the shadow of a monstrous illuminated Caltex sign - to both help a friend renovate a number of properties he had acquired in the place, and complete work on a thriller I had embarked upon shortly before a vicious attack of male menopause brought upon me a temporary (some would question that) loss of sanity and the permanent loss of my worldly possessions. Six months, I convinced myself, would be all the time I'd need to complete both tasks. I should have known better.

My arrival in this dusty dorp with its closely-knit, yet decidedly disparate communities of everyday folk, retirees, welfare beneficiaries and sheep farmers can be likened to the first drip of what has thus far proved to be little more than a trickle of migratory uitlanders.

Being one of only three English-speakers in Richmond (pronounced Reeshmourned) I was, and remain something of an oddity, and had I been in a healthier frame of mind, I would, no doubt, have immediately picked up the signals that my decision to move here had not been an altogether well-considered one.

Amongst the buildings my friend had purchased, is a charming old dorpshuis located at the commencement of the main street, and I, alongside a small crew that actually did most of the slog, applied myself to the trades of building, plastering and general restoration work.

Every so often a little old lady would labour up the street from the retirement home in which she lives to observe progress on the project. There she would stand in rapt silence for a few minutes, then shake her head in dismay and toddle off back down the road, until eventually it all became a little too much for her.

"What are you actually doing here in Richmond?" she one day addressed me in Afrikaans.

Now, I would have thought that that had been plain for all to see. But the ruminations of the aged was a subject about which I knew little, and the likely reaction of an elderly platterlander to the sarcasm of a marginally younger uitlander, even less. Politeness and consideration were thus called for.

"Well, I came here to help a friend fix this house," I replied in my own unique, and therefore seldom understood, version of the language, "and also to finish a book."

She looked at me in utter bewilderment. "But the place is in ruins!" she exclaimed. "Why would anyone want to waste his money on a ruin?"

Truth be told, the entire dorp was in ruins; and I'm not just referring to the buildings.

Some months later, my restoration work complete, I wheedled my way into a local arts and crafts project initiated by another uitlander. The shop from which this project was run is in the heart of the dorp and equidistant from the renovated house on which I had worked and the retirement home.

Daily, I would watch the old girl trundle up the road, often stopping to chat with the women who spun and rolled wool in the haven of winter warmth that is the shop's verandah, until curiosity again got the better of her.

"What are you doing now?" she enquired in Afrikaans.

"Running this little enterprise," I responded in lingua Conolly.

"For the same man who owns the house up the road?"

Already tongue-tired, I lapsed into English: "No, someone else."

She cupped a hand to her ear, lent forward, an astonished look on her wrinkled face: "Ernie Else?"

"No," I laughed, "a vet from Johannesburg."

"And the book?"

"Oh, that's going to take another six months at least."

She stood in silence for a good few seconds, her beady eyes darting between the industrious-looking women and me, as if seeking support from the former. "Is it in Afrikaans?" she eventually asked in sympathetic voice.

"No, English," I replied casually.

Now she fixed her eyes squarely on me, stared incredulously. "Goeie hemel!" she cried in disdain, "Hoe lank neem dit jou 'n boek te lees in jou eie taal?"

This then, was the day I first began making plans to evacuate the dreaded dorp. Born in Durban, educated (well, partially – no, make that slightly) in Cape Town, I had spent most of my adult life in Johannesburg, that gloriously ugly city with a 'can do' attitude like few others in the world. And here I was in the dreaded dorp, where the highlight of my stay thus far had been an evening spent sitting, wine glass in hand, atop a koppie overlooking the N1, consumed by fits of hysterical laughter as car after car sped past Richmond's main source of income – a traffic camera. Had life really come to this?

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EIGHTEEN BRIDGES

Stories That Connect

The New Karoo

What a remote book festival says about the new South Africa

BY Fred Stenson

Thursday, April 12th, 2012

It began with a phone call. Peter Baker, a Canadian veterinarian with a small animals practice in Johannesburg, South Africa, wanted me to come to Bookbedonnerd III, a literary festival in the Great Karoo Desert village of Richmond. Peter's partner in the festival, Darryl David, had located my novel *The Great Karoo* (about western Canadians fighting in the Boer War) online. I assumed this meant he liked the book, but in fact it was so thoroughly unavailable in South Africa, neither Peter nor Darryl had physically seen it. It was a Governor General's Award for Fiction finalist in 2008, and named for their desert: good enough. Would I come?



While organizing the expedition, I was called upon—by my family and my potential funders—to explain how attending a book festival in a largely uninhabited desert on the far side of the planet was going to enhance my career. They wanted something more substantial than my book's title and the desert having the same name, and I was able to satisfy most concerns with the attendance numbers of the first two Bookbedonnerds (and in the end it did result in my book becoming available in South Africa). But another set of questions had sprouted in my own mind: Why was I so determined to go? Why did so many South Africans drive hundreds of kilometres to attend a desert festival? For that matter, why had Peter and Darryl created such a logistically demanding event? It's hard enough to get people to cross their own city, let alone a large country, to attend a book festival.

When I boarded the jet for Johannesburg, I was still foggy on several points. Even the meaning of Bookbedonnerd wasn't clear. Book was book, but the Internet was having problems with bedonnerd. The only place I could find it was in a glossary for Athol Fugard plays, where it was translated as "beaten into the ground." Books beaten into the ground. Was this definitive? Promising? Worrying?

On the far side of the world, Peter Baker's son William picked me up at the Johannesburg airport in the family "buckee" (pick-up), and we sped south into the prairie that comprises most of the fourteen hundred kilometres separating Johannesburg and Cape Town. The Great Karoo Desert is a four hundred thousand square kilometre patch in the middle of that expanse. My novel was about western Canadians who came here in 1900 to fight for the British against Dutch South African farmers. The Canadian cowboys left home in winter, arrived in African

summer, and probably felt lucky until they entered the blast furnace of the Karoo and realized there was nothing there for horse or man to eat or drink. After seven hours of driving, Will and I also entered the Karoo, and, in the failing light, I saw a Canadian flag flying from a rocky hilltop. “Dad put that up to welcome you.”

Everyone calls Peter Baker ‘Baker’, including his wife. The moment I stepped out of the buckee on mainstreet Richmond, Baker lifted me off the ground. A ready grin in a pliant face, wild eyes: a likeable human being. Next I met his wife Beth: fit and pretty, with a lovely British-South African drawl. No antiseptic air-kissing here; she gave me a proper buss. Then I was in their restaurant’s back lounge, and the youngest Baker, Rob, was introducing me to South African beer at twelve rand (two dollars) a bottle. A convivial blur ensued.

What morning revealed next day was a well-treed dorp with curlicue gables and fretwork verandas in the old Dutch style. Richmond has its fair share of razor wire, iron bars and serious guard dogs, but it struck me as much less security obsessed than most South African towns. This was my second trip, the first being a novel-research journey in 2005.

By the time I took my first walk in the village, I knew the story of how the Bakers and Richmond had become united. When their daughter went to Stellenbosch University, Beth and Peter drove down regularly to visit, breaking the trip in Richmond at an old Karoo couple’s B&B. Richmond had a problem; it was dying. Houses had become so cheap that people were tearing them down for the rare yellowwood.

The Bakers bought one place, then more, and more, until they had a significant stake in Richmond. When Peter met Darryl David, who was interested in launching a Booktown in the Great Karoo, the two partnered. The Booktown movement started in 1961, with Hay-On-Wye, in Wales, near the England border. At the time Peter and Darryl met, there were Booktowns on every continent except Africa. The challenge was clear. Darryl (South Africa’s only Indian professor of Afrikaans) would concentrate his considerable diplomatic skills on wooing the Booktown organization, while Peter made sure Richmond had enough bookstores to qualify. Richmond made the grade: Africa’s first Booktown. The Bookbedonnerd Festival followed.

The heart of the festival is a high-ceilinged former library on Main Street. As I entered, Darryl was making a welcome speech about why he’d entitled this year’s festival, “The Coolie Odyssey.” He wanted to focus on Indian writing in South Africa, and the title was to suggest the racism East Indians had endured. There was a mild argument among the Indian writers present, most of whom felt ‘Coolie’ was a term best left on history’s ash heap.

At that stage, I got nervous. My first presentation was later that morning, and I wondered how a Canadian novel about a 110-year-old British-Afrikaaner war would go over. Was the Boer War something else the new South Africa would be happier leaving behind? When my turn came, I started reading a scene set in the Great Karoo. As I was rolling along, I checked my watch and realized my time was running out. I had pre-timed the reading, but hadn’t allowed for Peter’s generous introduction. Now I was on the verge of going over, not the kind of first impression I cared to make. I was floundering in search of a way to stop when an elderly man walked by me and out of the building. Seconds later, the whole audience jumped up and gasped. They could see the old fellow through the window, and he’d suddenly collapsed.

Peter and Will Baker raced out and went to work. Peter took his pulse; Will administered CPR. A nervous stretch later, the man revived. The family gathered around Peter for an explanation. In his blunt style, he said, “You died. William got you going again.”

After the dust of this had, literally, settled, a few people said they were sorry my reading had been cut short. I kept my mouth shut. Basically I’d been rescued, albeit shockingly.

That night, at Bakers’ Supper Club, while the festival-goers were living it up, a couple of men from the adjacent

African town entered and sat at the bar for a beer. The Baker boys greeted them warmly but the men seemed ill at ease. They had come for a reason beyond a drink, and, when I was introduced as a writer from Canada, they decided I would suit their purpose, which, it turned out, was to make a socio-political point. After small talk, the spokesman of the two said he thought the festival was good for the town but wasn't it ironic that, just over there—and here he pointed toward his village—"Most of the children cannot read."

From the moment of arrival, I had been looking for some overarching principle that held the festival together. Darryl's theme, "The Coolie Odyssey," suggested a racial harmony agenda, and, to my innocent Canadian ears, that meant a focus on the old racial strifes and how the country could heal from them. Several festival presenters and guests were well suited to speak to that subject, especially Ahmed Kathrada, who had spent eighteen years jailed at Robben Island with Nelson Mandela. Also on hand was Denis Beckett, the man who'd run the anti-Apartheid magazine *Frontline* in Johannesburg through the bloody nineteen-eighties. Beckett's magazine lambasted hypocrisy in all directions and offended most everyone, but he was never shut down. Also present was *Frontline* contributor Rian Malan, an international journalist whose book, *My Traitor's Heart*, had laid bare his nation's (and his own) contradictions with rare and harsh candour.

Near the end of the second day, Chris Nicholson gave a talk about his new book *Papwa Sewgolum: From Pariah to Legend*. As I sat down to listen, I had only just learned that Mr. Nicholson was the judge who had heard the Jacob Zuma corruption trial. A key moment in the trial was when Judge Nicholson had allowed possible political manipulation of the evidence against Zuma to be argued by the defence. That led to acquittal and removed the final obstacle to Zuma's presidency.

If there was a person on the hot-seat of current South African politics, it was Chris Nicholson, but he wasn't in Richmond to talk about Zuma, nor did anyone try to force him. His *Sewgolum* biography is the true story of an Indian South African golfer. Self-taught, he had an awkward reverse grip that caused people to dismiss him, even after he began to dominate coloured tournaments. He was excluded from national tournaments under the rules of Apartheid, and that was his fate until an entrepreneur, Graham Wolf, (the inventor of Oil of Olay) took up his cause. Under Wolf's patronage, Papwa Sewgolum went on to win two major tournaments in Holland and to defeat Afrikaans hero Gary Player in a national championship.

Probably it was through Chris Nicholson that I started to tumble to the deeper, truer meaning of the Richmond festival. If it was about the big issues of South Africa, then it was doing so on an equal footing with regional and personal causes. Side by side with Ahmed Kathrada's recounting his ordeal in prison and his role in the first African National Congress (ANC) government, there were presentations about Karoo architecture, the endangered African wild dog, Afrikaans poetry. South Africa has been talking (and fighting) about its big issues of race and poverty for decades, but *Bookbedonnerd* represents something the nation has been less able to do until now, which is to talk and joke about all manner of things, great and small, and to do so in the absence of aggression and fear.

The fellow in the bar with his comment about illiteracy in his village was also right. The festival would lack something until the people of the African village could read its books and otherwise fully participate and mutually enjoy. But perhaps that is to be the festival's future, not its present.

Saturday was the festival's last day. When I took part in a panel on my novel that morning, there was a pleasant surprise in the audience: Geoff White, a friend from university days in Calgary. Geoff, a former journalist, now works with the Canadian High Commission in Pretoria. We had communicated by email, but his visit to the festival was unexpected.

Later that day, Geoff was called into diplomatic action. During one of the final sessions, Ahmed Kathrada aired a serious gripe against Canada. Of all the countries he had visited as a touring author, only Canada had impeded

his entry. Invited for a book tour in 2006, he was told by the Canadian High Commission he needed police clearance to get a temporary visa. Later, the High Commission compounded the problem by saying there would be an exception made for him. Kathrada told them to do him no favours. As long as formerly imprisoned South African freedom fighters needed police clearance to enter Canada, he would prefer not to go there.

The minute the session ended, Geoff went forward to conciliate. It was a dramatic moment and a reminder that Canada's light has dimmed in recent years. The Harper government that impeded Mr. Kathrada in 2006 still harbours MP Rob Anders, the man who once called Nelson Mandela a communist and a terrorist.

In the fall of 2011, when Bookbedonnerd time rolled round, I was at home in Cochrane, Alberta, and full of longing. Though it made no sense, I wanted to be back in Richmond, taking up a post at the Dinner Club bar, soaking up the high-rollicking fun. Instead, I wrote Denis Beckett to get his perspective on the festival to help me write about it. He wrote back immediately and said that, for him, the key meaning of Bookbedonnerd is that it rescued a Karoo village from death by yellowwood hunters, and that it was "all from books." While the big cities of South Africa were having difficulty supporting independent bookstores, Richmond, a dusty dorp in the Great Karoo, was sustaining a village full of them.

I think I got the message. For decades, South Africa was a place where things like Karoo villages often died, from fear and insecurity. A revived Karoo village is like a flock of a critically endangered birds found bathing in a pond. In Richmond, book people from Johannesburg and Cape Town can gather with the folks of the Karoo and talk avidly about things that would have gotten them killed in the nineteen-eighties, and, in so doing, help fashion the new South Africa. For Denis Beckett, this has been accomplished by "beautiful lunacy." A South African Indian teaching university-level Afrikaans and a Canadian veterinarian get together and rescue a desert dorp through the currency of books—what could be more beautifully lunatic than that?

Such things matter, because the situation there changes every day. Even as I was finishing this piece, interesting news came from South Africa. Irwin Cotler, a Canadian Liberal Member of Parliament (and former Justice Minister in the Martin Government), had been to South Africa and had met with the country's foreign minister, Ebrahim Ebrahim. Mr. Ebrahim was another ANC freedom fighter long imprisoned on Robben Island, and he and Cotler discussed the "criminal record" rule that was impeding South Africa's former freedom fighters from visiting Canada. Cotler vowed to go home and launch a private member's bill to change this rule, and, first thing back, he had a press conference in which he announced this intention. There are early signs the Harper Government might be willing to back the change.

As a postscript, I now know what Bookbedonnerd means. According to the Afrikaans language scholar Darryl David, bedonnerd means "crazy about." Bookbedonnerd means "crazy about books." David did admit, however, that there is another connotation of bedonnerd, which is "fucked up." Asked how this has affected things, he said it has caused him "a lot of uphill."

About The Author



Fred Stenson is the author of “The Trade”, which was nominated for the 2000 Giller Prize and won the inaugural Grant MacEwan Literary Award, the City of Edmonton Book Prize and the Writers Guild of Alberta’s George Bugnet Novel Award. The Great Karoo is Stenson’s eighth work of fiction and fifteenth book. He was raised in the Alberta foothills north of Chief Mountain.

For comments, suggestions and criticism, please do not hesitate to contact us via e-mail at any time.

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