

MEMOIR OFFERS A TEXTURED NARRATIVE OF A LIFE LESS ORDINARY LIVED TO THE FULL

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André Brink: *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir*. London: Harvill Secker, 2009.

The cover photo of Brink's autobiography shows a young, innocent-looking Brink, aged 13, bursting with pride at his first kill. He holds a springbok between his legs; his hands grasp the fork of its horns. The animal looks remarkably life-like; the picture seems innocuous - but appearances can be deceptive. This is the author's initiation into the casual violence of the hunt, part of what was expected of him as a boy, part of the price to be paid for acceptance and approval by family, by friends, by volk

The opening chapters evoke the world of Brink's childhood, the various dorps in which his father served as magistrate, and the sharpness and clarity of the writing make these among the most memorable parts of the narrative. Beneath the surface normality of life in these rural, Calvinist towns lurks 'something violent, something inexplicable - a sense of sin and menace without which no village could survive'. A leitmotif running through the memoir is the gratuitous 'surplus of violence' that seems foundational to our society. The young André grows up being proud of his father, the magistrate who dispenses justice, 'second only to God' - but this is the same man who (one unforgettable Saturday morning) ignores the plea of a desperate, badly beaten black man who arrives at his house, and sends him back to the police - the very people who had beaten him in the first place. It is the author's first, shocking intimation of 'the long, long history of excess' that continues to afflict us. For the young boy, it is perhaps the end of innocence

The early chapters trace the conflicts that were eventually to lead Brink into open rebellion against the norms of his 'volk'. At the time, and just as importantly, we see the incipient writer discovering the potential of words, of language, to shape and express experience. After his first exposure to English, language is no longer something to be taken for granted. It is this awakening to language (rather than any opposition to apartheid) that explains the birth of the writer. This fascination with language also links with another of the book's recurring themes: it is his attempt to discover the meaning of the word 'vry' that leads to the young boy's first (not entirely successful) sexual experience! For Brink, then, writing begins as both a linguistic adventure and, an attempt to explore, however uncertainly, some of the tensions underlying his 'seemingly placid, untroubled, terribly conventional world

Brink is, of course, one of the most acclaimed South African writers of the twentieth century, and his career spans the last 50 or 60 years. The twin themes of the memoir are his development as a writer, and his emergence as an oppositional voice in South Africa. Interwoven with this, and also inseparable to the process, is the record of his relationships with a number of women, the most important of whom are 'Ingrid' (Ingrid Jonker), a woman identified only as 'H', and his present wife, Karina. Brink deals with intimate and often painful material with restraint and with honesty. There is little attempt at self-

justification or self-aggrandisement: the writing is candid, often humorous, at times self-deprecating. In the chapter on Ingrid Jonker he is clearly trying to do justice to her memory, as well as to set the record straight

In rough chronological order these are the events that shook and shaped his life: the two years spent in Paris (1959-61), his reaction to Sharpeville (1960); his role as one of the leading 'Sestigers'; his 'break' with volk and vaderland, signalled most dramatically by the publication (and banning) of *Kennis van die Aand* (1973); the 1968 students' revolt in Paris (he was on sabbatical in France at the time); the deaths in detention of Mapetla Mohapi and Steve Biko; the trip to Dakar in 1987 as part of a delegation to meet the ANC; and voting in the 1994 election. Interwoven with these events is the more intimate narrative of his encounters with various women, as well as an account of his father's death. Add to this the impact of particular writers, artists and places (Camus, Picasso, Mozart, Paris, Salzburg, Robben Island, Auschwitz) and one has a richly textured narrative of a life lived to the full, a life less ordinary

There are, inevitably, absences and gaps. His first and second wives, Estelle and Alta, are at best shadowy presences, and of his third and fourth wives there is no mention at all. No narrative can be complete, or claim to tell the whole truth (if there is such a thing), and if Brink has chosen to respect the privacy of some of the people who have entered into his life, he presumably has that right. The most puzzling absence in the public record is the lack of any mention of Soweto 1976, an event which transformed the political landscape of South Africa. It is hinted at in the title of the chapter that deals with the students' revolt in Paris ('Power in the Streets'); this (absent) chapter might have formed a significant counterpoint to the earlier chapter

Apart from being a compelling read, *A Fork in the Road* will be of great value to anyone with an interest in the political and literary history of South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century. Readers of Brink will find abundant evidence of the intimate link between life and letters. What we have is a compelling record of the way in which one writer of note responded to the challenge of his time. What sustains Brink throughout is a belief in the power of the word, and his unswerving attachment to the core values enunciated by Camus: 'freedom, justice and truth'. He concludes his memoir with an unflinching assessment of the failures of the Mbeki-led ANC government – 'a regime that has lost its way' (his admiration for Mandela and Tutu remains undiminished). Ironically, after all he has lived through, Brink finds himself again in the position of the rebel, speaking out (this time from outside the laager) against whatever threatens the values enshrined in our new constitution. This gives a very contemporary relevance to his memoir

