

## 'I try to be my own publicity manager...'

**K Sello Duiker**

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The writer as myth. Some resolutely refuse to step into the lime-light (JD Salinger). Others hide behind a pseudonym (Paul Small). William Burroughs was a master at mythologising. He depersonalised the biographical data in his work and looked at himself from an outsider's perspective. He described his experiences with illegal activities without any form of introspection and created the image of a philosophical psychopath.

The young South-African writer, K Sello Duiker (29), nourishes the myth of the



writer in another way. First there is that unusual, carefully-construed name. In the South African context, where a name gives away skin colour and language, this is a significant move. It makes the writer elusive and expands his literary scope.

K Sello Duiker. It sounds important. The floating K gives it an air of aristocracy.

There's something American about it too, in the tradition of F Scott Fitzgerald. But what about Sello? And how does Duiker, an Afrikaans word, fit into the picture? Duiker laughs. 'I try to be my own publicity manager. The name is chosen deliberately.

K Sello Duiker... As a writer you have to be clear about where you want to be placed. Kabelo is my first name, the name that I use for my family. My mother's name is Sello and my father is called Duiker. I speak some Afrikaans, because one of my forefathers was coloured. But I grew up in a family with a grandfather who adhered strongly to black nationalism.'

The multidimensional name fits him like an elegant

costume. Duiker lived in Soweto until he was seventeen. He then went to England for two years. He studied journalism and history of art at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, and subsequently stayed in Cape Town for two years, where he worked as a copywriter. He stayed in the

dangerously violent neighbourhoods as well as with the elite of Cape Town. Both the streets and university taught him about life. He read a lot, and smoked even more dope. And even if Sotho is his mother tongue, he prefers English.

Duiker: 'You have to adapt and pick up another language if you want to survive. For me that language was English. We are Joe's kids who came to Jo'burg. We are post-apartheid children, we are hybrid. We have to survive in the townships, contend with other languages, try to find a job. Sotho is not an option. There are eleven languages. You by-pass the problem with English. But at the same time, I'm not ashamed to say that I aim for the biggest possible reading public.'

Duiker is a post-apartheid remix of South-Africa. Self-assured, confused. Energetic, searching. Those are also the themes that re-occur in his novels. His debut, **Thirteen cents**, is about street children in Cape Town who prostitute themselves in order to survive. In his second novel, **The quiet violence of dreams**, the protagonist is a young man who becomes increasingly aware of his homosexuality and who starts working in an escort agency/massage parlour for men.

The two books labelled Duiker as a 'gay writer'. 'People like to pigeon-hole others. The homosexuality, the violence, the street scenes, the dope; they don't trust this young man at all,' chuckles Duiker. 'The first book is not about homosexuality, but because there were kids involved who prostitute themselves, everybody wrongly thinks of it as gay literature.'

In order to be able to write this first book, he 'went underground' for a few weeks and lived with a couple of street kids in Cape Town. 'Every morning on my way to work they were nagging for cigarettes. One day one of them, Sammy, a nice boy, disappeared. The others asked me whether I was prepared to help them find him. I spent three weeks with them, slept on the street, lived on the street. Can you imagine? Me, a 24-year-old man, under the care of a couple of 12-year-old kids. I didn't have any experience at all with this sort of life. It prompted me to write. And then one day we found Sammy. What happened? A nice gentleman took care of Sammy, gave him food and a place to sleep.

In exchange for perverted games. After three weeks, Sammy had enough.'

We are sitting in an outdoor café at the Rosebank Shopping Mall in Johannesburg, a place that has been wavering for years now between 'chique', trendy and decay. Lately it's been trendy again. Duiker eats a

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fruit salad. Coloured dreadlocks hang from under his crocheted beanie. His glasses, goatee and bright, clever eyes make him look a bit like Spike Lee.

He received the 2001 Commonwealth Prize for the best debut in Africa for **Thirteen cents**. The ceremony took place in Ghana. 'I had hoped to meet Zadie Smith. Sadly, she didn't come. People like Zadie find lions and giraffes more important. They don't pitch up if the event doesn't take place in South Africa and if there's no five star hotel involved. That's why I loathe the literary world. Look, we are young writers and we would have liked to have met somebody like Zadie.'

In comparison with his debut, his second novel was a tour de force. **The quiet violence of dreams** consists of 457 pages,

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revolves around crazy people and homosexuality and is told from various perspectives. The author is a voyeur who goes everywhere and hears everything. He scours the streets of the city, mixes languages. He crawls under the skin of the paranoid Tshepo, whose mother was murdered by his gangster father and who ended up in an institution for his excessive

drug abuse. Once declared cured, Tshepo hangs around the Cape homosexual subculture where the new South Africa bares itself literally and figuratively in all its dimensions.

The author transplants himself with great ease into Mmabatho, the best friend of Tshepo, who moves graciously between the white and black worlds of Cape Town, her African heritage not forgotten, but also not a fanatical black nationalist. Gradually Duiker introduces his new characters, through which the reader is allowed peeks into the different Cape subcultures, like the psychopath Zebron, the Afrikaner masseur West, and the coloured Chris with whom Tshepo shares a flat and by whom he is raped.

Bearing in mind the concept of mythologising, Duiker reveals little about the parallels between his own life and that of his protagonists. 'I regard my research as very important', is the only thing he wants to say about the matter. 'It's important to know what you're talking about.'

The threat of violence is tangible in all his stories and in all his characters. 'I want to show that violence has a deeper meaning,' says Duiker. 'Without wanting to trivialise the seriousness of violence, I think one can say that violence is a culture that communicates a certain message. In **Thirteen cents** I wanted to explore how violence is not only a way of dominating people, but I also wanted to show that violence is used by people to communicate with each other

and to convey a message. The way in which this happens is deplorable. But we are part of a violent culture, and we never knew a period of rest, nor did we receive help to enter into a process of healing after apartheid.

That is our fate, and the cause of the psychosis that we carry around with us.

It will take some time still, before violence neutralises itself. I look behind it: where does it come from, is it hate, anger or communication? In any case, it's a kind of language.'

Duiker recounts the incidents that took place in the townships when he was young. The story's about the 'hero' Macuse who was hacked to pieces in Soweto. Sello's

friends asking him to join them to go and have a look at the severed head. 'Violence has made a lasting impression on me, and not only in a negative way. It is a fascinating aspect of our culture and our heritage. I tried to see the message behind it. Was it unadulterated barbarism, as the media would like to portray it, or does it have to do with another type of reality that Western culture just cannot grasp?

Duiker is the hybrid kid, the son of Joe who came to the hyper urban capital Johannesburg and who perforce left all his traditions behind. His literary models are Bessie Head, Dambudzo Marechera, Ben Okri, Zadie Smith. Writers who deal with schizophrenia, insanity, culture clashes, surrealism and metaphysics. Duiker does not write to shock or to push back frontiers. 'Transgression is political and subjective. I on the other hand am interested in the human element, the social structures. That is what is missing in the post apartheid era: identifying the processes and trying to understand what is going on. How people integrate and live together.'

Duiker researches. Duiker writes. In order to understand, and to understand more of what he cannot grasp. In order to discover his own identity. He recently followed a course to become a sangoma. 'I attended the course for two months,' he says. 'That is not enough to call yourself a sangoma. You have to go through four stages. But it did change me. It was an enriching experience and it gave me a better understanding of the past and of the culture that I as a township boy never inherited, as a result of the arrival of Joe in Jo'burg. It is another reality altogether, a communal experience. You go to the homelands, fetch water from the well. You wake up, you pray, you meditate. It's very spiritual. You are cold and ill, you get visions. Like a shaman. It's got to do with healing. You can write about it. Writing is also a healing process.'

The last pieces of fruit disappear from his plate. 'I can't tell you everything, because there's also a sacred aspect to it,' he adds in a secretive way. He smiles, and another mask appears before his face. All of a sudden he is again the sharp and wily publicity agent, the sly writer who nourishes the myth.

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