



## The Naive Youthful Narrator in the Literature of South African Apartheid

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**Abstract:** The skillful use of young adult voices in fictional narrative can build tolerance and global diversity by exposing discrimination through narrative irony. South African post-apartheid novels by Mark Behr and Michiel Heynes provide a demonstration of this narrative technique by exposing the evils of South African apartheid through the voices of young characters chosen to narrate the novels.

**Key words:** South Africa, apartheid, youthful narrator, Behr, Heynes.

One important goal of the International Board on Books for Young People has been to work to create the conditions for democracy and peace and understanding between peoples. Literature contains the power to create empathy for differing cultural and political traditions and to explore the intolerance of societies, particularly those attitudes and actions that foster discrimination. In South Africa before its political transformation in 1994, widespread human intolerance was expressed through the system of *apartheid*. South Africa's transformation was mirrored in its literature, as writers struggled to understand what had led to the brutal system as well as the implications of its demise.

*The Smell of Apples* by Mark Behr (1995) and *The Children's Day* by Michiel Heynes (2002) are two novels that feature first-person youthful narrators and that subtly expose the exploitative attitudes and practices of apartheid. Both novels were written after the unbanning of the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela's attendant freedom spurred South Africa's first open elections and its historic transformation to a multi-racial democracy. However, both novels are set in the decades before apartheid collapsed. Behr's narrator Marnus (age 11) and Heynes's narrator Simon (age 10 in the novel's earliest scenes) assume privileges that accrue to their white classification and European heritage and often display the discriminatory attitudes they have learned at home and in school. They are naive narrators because they don't understand what their language reveals even as their readers often do understand. Their authors thus build subtly effective irony between what the two lads say and what they reveal to readers.

The following paper uses *The Smell of Apples* and *The Children's Day* to illustrate how the skillful use of young adult voices can build tolerance and global diversity, in this case



through narrative irony that exposes discrimination. For example, Behr's narrator Marnus says that "When Bantus (black South Africans) come here to work, the police send them away because they try to take everything over" (53). Meanwhile, his author Mark Behr expects the reader to understand that the police power to send "Bantus" away derives from apartheid's racial classification and pass laws, and that Marnus learned his discriminatory attitudes from his mother, who tells him: "And there are *millions* waiting where those millions came from; they breed like rats" (88). Similarly, Heyns's narrator Simon notes that his town's colonial Department of Bantu Affairs cannot actually be located in the town itself "because it attracted Bantus" (124). The reader understands that the black South Africans are forbidden by apartheid laws from entering the town itself unless they have passes to work for white people. Ironically, whites will closely manage the black South Africans and their affairs through government bureaucracy, but will not suffer to mingle with them.

The dramatic endings of both novels eventually prepare stunning surprises for their youthful narrators that open their eyes to reveal both to them and to their readers the devastating effects of prejudice—what happens when everything one believes to be true turns out to be wrong. Because most readers have naturally identified with the otherwise-engaging young speakers through effective first-person narration that builds identification with the storyteller, the narrators' eventual new understanding enlightens readers as well—rooting out prejudice and intolerance through the enduring power of literature and prompting the readers of the novels to explore deeply hidden misunderstandings.

Of the two narrators, Mark Behr's Marnus is more directly affected by parental and societal prejudice and thus parrots a more directly racist discourse. When 11-year-old Marnus and his school chums visit the National Museum in Cape Town, their teacher tells them about what she calls Bushmen, the indigenous people of the Khoi and San nations who one of the school children recalls were hunted by his Dutch-derived Afrikaans or "Boer" great-grandfather. "Miss Englebrecht said it wasn't true", Marnus intones. "It wasn't the Boers that killed off all the Bushmen, it was the Xhosas", which the informed reader will know to be the tribal family of Nelson Mandela and of many other black South Africans. "She said the Xhosas are a terrible



nation and that it was them that used to rob and terrorize the farmers on the Eastern frontier, long before the Zulus in Natal so cruelly murdered Boer women and little children” (8).

Of many similar examples in the novel, the following are typical: Marnus tells the reader that the world won't play South African sports teams “because the whole world hates South Africa” (12). “Overseas they're bringing politics into sports, and they discriminate against us white South Africans” (44). His mother says that mixed-race South Africans are sneaky. “You can never ever trust them. After all the years of supplying them with a job and a decent income, they simply turn around and stab you in the back. Just like the Mau Mau in East Africa” (20). Marnus describes the activities of anti-apartheid students at the University of Western Cape as “the savage goings-on at the Coloured University on the Flats. No one could manage to study amongst those hooligans” (32). He mimics South Africa's all-encompassing racial classifications to contrast black South Africans to those of mixed race.

The Bantus are even dumber than the Coloureds. Luckily, the Coloureds still have a bit of sailor-blood in their veins. But by now even that flows so thin, that they're mostly alcoholics who booze up all their wages over weekends. More often than not, they're criminals who won't ever get to see heaven. St. Peter, who stands at the portals of eternity, will pass out stone-cold when he smells their breath. (39)

By the use of such phrases as “the portals of eternity,” unlikely to be in the everyday lexicon of an 11-year-old, but certain to be heard at the family's Dutch Reformed church, the author subtly reveals that Marnus is mimicking uncritically what he has been taught to think. Against such prejudicial rants, which soon would grow unendurable were they not spoken by a lad who otherwise is genuinely sweet and loyal, Mark Behr builds the childhood life of a young South African who loves to fish and swim, who will do anything he can to please his military officer father, who gets good grades in school, and who genuinely cares for his sister and mother. Behr mines these seemingly universal human values to build reader identification with his narrator despite our understanding of his limitations.

Yet, as the novel approaches its climax, the romantic imagery of his dashing military father is severely compromised. Behr slowly reveals to the reader through his unwitting narrator that the father is deeply entrenched in clandestine weapons smuggling arrangements with the government of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. Moreover, the father and a Chilean army



officer visiting Marnus's family to conclude the weapons deal are involved in even more secret activities that will scar young Marnus deeply and will compromise his future.

As mentioned earlier, Michiel Heyns's narrator Simon proves a somewhat more subtle voice, though one equally under the spell of an all-pervasive racial and social ideology. Heyns's vision of white South African life is rather more complicated than Behr's in that he creates a distinction between white South Africans who are largely working-class Afrikaners and those with higher cultural pretensions. Simon is the son of a magistrate whose family works hard to give him the benefits of an English education and to "rise above" their Afrikaans roots. He attends an English boarding school and reacquaints himself at an interscholastic tennis match with a childhood friend named Fanie van den Bergh, who attends a working class Afrikaans school. The tennis match sends Simon into deep reminiscence, which Heyns depicts in flashback chapters starting when Simon is 10. Much of the novel's humor, therefore, and not a little of its biting social satire consists of Simon's uncritical acceptance of the attitudes of his family—his mother, in particular.

For example, when Fanie hails Simon on the latter's campus as the working-class school bus unloads for the tennis match, the latter is mortified: "I had just about established myself as not really a Ball-bearing (laboring-class Afrikaner), and to be hailed now in unambiguous Afrikaans would set back my redefinition of myself irretrievably" (24), he admits. Building from this sort of attitude and revealed progressively through the flashbacks, Heyns shows that Simon is deeply uncomfortable with racial, class, and sexual difference and that his ideology is deeply engrained in Apartheid culture. He believes that "Johannesburg had recently been revealed to harbor a nest of Communists plotting to overthrow the government, and the city now loomed in my imagination as a center of conspiracy and subversion in addition to its more traditional turpitudes" (31). Likewise, the arrival in their provincial community of a Johannesburg lad named Steve introduces unconventional sexual desire to the novel. It is clear that Simon is attracted to the older lad, but denies it to himself and his friends, calling Steve a "pervert" and psychologically distancing himself from a playful romp with Steve during a river swim. Heyns thus deftly interweaves the discrimination that Steve faces with that of the black South Africans whose homes ring the white town and associates Simon's silence regarding sexual difference to



his acceptance of racism. When a group of woman wants to remove Steve from the town, “my mother [who does not know of Steve’s association with Simon] pointed out that there were no legal grounds for driving anybody from one’s midst without that person’s consent. “What about the Bantu?” Mrs van Onselen demanded. “They’re being moved all the time, and some of them are quite respectable.” Simon’s mother replies: “Yes, but that’s because they’re black. There’s no law to move a white person from anywhere” (43). Eventually the town rids itself of Steve only when he is seen conversing with “two Bantus next to the road” (48).

Heyns thus shows that Simon’s mother uncritically relies on the white privilege enforced by apartheid even though she considers herself more tolerant and thereby above the unschooled practitioners of the system’s worst excesses. When a black South African maid is threatened with deportation to her apartheid-enforced “homeland”, Simon’s mother objects vigorously, but is unable to surrender her privilege. “It’s not as if Mary is going to make trouble” (105), the mother says. “‘Trouble’ was a vaguely defined term much used in those days to refer to anything black people did other than work where white people wanted them to work” (105), Simon notes. Simon’s father insists that as a magistrate he has no choice but to enforce the law of the land even if “the laws are insane”, as his mother puts it. Simon’s mother backs down when her husband says that if he cannot enforce the nation’s laws, he will have to resign his job—thus surrendering both status and income. “‘I don’t know’, my mother said. ‘I don’t know,’ and absentmindedly gave me a second helping of pudding before I asked for it” (105).

Simon apparently has learned these lessons of accommodation well, despite a current of rebellion that on one occasion causes him to ask his father: “Do you send people to prison for pass offenses because you really believe they belong there or because of Verwoerd and Vorster” (172), the spiritual architect of apartheid and his successor as prime minister. But Simon seldom can sustain such rebellion, which he mostly represses as too unsettling. Each of the flashback chapters thus centers around someone that the town, and Simon himself, would rather avoid, even as each chapter reveals Simon’s underlying fascination with difference. More and more that difference comes to center on his own sexual identification and on his childhood acquaintance Fanie van den Bergh. Denying his own increasingly apparent sexual orientation, Simon attempts to inform on two schoolmates he sees having an intimate physical relationship in



the chapel. “I was trembling,” he says, “but I couldn’t tell why. I felt a mixture of things: a kind of shame and anger and excitement and resentment and hatred all mixed up with one another” (224). Hoping to stifle his own desires, Simon resolves that the miscreants must be punished.

Therefore, through his naive narrator Michiel Heyns is exploring intolerance and the links between desire, repression, and oppression. When Simon betrays his friends to the headmaster, the latter surprises Simon—but not the careful reader who has been aware of the ironies all along—by stating that the lad wants to punish the very instincts that most animate him. “If a boy of 13 is prepared to betray his friends just because he has the power to do so, is it any wonder that things are the way they are out there?” (231), the headmaster asks, referring to the apartheid state and its increasingly violent regulation of marginalized South Africans. “Your background has taught you to regard evil as normal. I want you to recognize it for what it is” (232-33). This revelation ultimately leads Simon directly to his alter ego and working-class double, Fanie van den Bergh, in a dramatic climax backlit by a crackling summer thunderstorm, a transcendence of “dumb absolutism” (244), whose fuller dimensions I won’t spoil for you on this occasion.

Marnus’s primary narration in *The Smell of Apples* also is naive, though it is interspersed with italicized sections narrated by the adult Marnus, now a South African soldier in the illegal border war with socialist Angola. The two strands of narration—naive and youthful vs. experienced and doomed—collide at the novel’s end when Marnus learns that the Chilean arms buyer and his father have been sexually abusing his best friend. Like Heyns, Behr is exploring the commonality of repression and oppression—what happens when one denies one’s true feeling and punishes them in the Other. The reader comes to understand that Marnus’s unwillingness to confront his father as to what he knows about his father’s sexual abuse leads him blindly to emulate his father’s misplaced patriotism, specifically to sacrifice himself on the altar of an illegal war fought to prop up a dying apartheid regime. Behr’s youthful narrator, though provisionally enlightened as to the abuse around him, deliberately chooses to ignore it, to wrap himself in piety rather than in spiritual revelation. The main narration thus remains deeply ironic, culminating the novel in this manner: “[Dad] prays for Mister Smith and Chile, and he



prays for our men in uniform. He asks God to bless our country in 1974, and to strengthen the defense force so that we can conquer the enemy bearing down on us from all directions. While Dad is praying, I open my eyes and look out across the bay. I don't know whether there's a more beautiful place in the whole world," Marnus concludes. "It's a perfect day, just like yesterday. One of those days when Mum says: the Lord's hand is resting over False Bay" (200).

The italicized sections of the novel reveal the wages of this falsity, which Behr evokes by alluding to the actual name of False Bay, the picturesque body of water east of Cape Town that European explorers first entered on the mistaken belief that they had circumnavigated the Cape of Good Hope. As in *The Children's Day*, I will not spoil the novel by revealing Marnus's ultimate fate as a soldier in his father's army. But the two novels, written in the immediate post-apartheid era by writers deeply critical of the regime, deliver their lessons subtly and effectively. And their primary tools are the voices and once-sweet innocence of children navigating their way through a fallen world.

## **Bibliography**

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