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Interviews - Antjie Krog:

Antjie Krog needs no introduction. With various awards to her credit, including the Eugene Marais Prize, the Hertzog Prize, and the Dutch/Flemish Reina Prinson Geerling Prize, she is one of South Africa's most valuable voices. Krog also led the SABC radio team that reported on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The team was awarded the Pringle Award for Excellence in radio journalism, and Krog was awarded the Foreign Correspondent's Award for Outstanding Journalism for her Mail & Guardian articles on the TRC. While she visited Johannesburg for the launch of her latest book, *A Change of Tongue*, she spared us a few moments for an interview.

EB: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and where you come from?

AK: I was born in the Free State in Kroonstad, in 1952. I grew up there, and also went to the primary and high school there. I grew up on a farm. I then went to Bloemfontein where I completed a BA degree, and also an honours in English. I completed my MA at the University of Pretoria. The first book I published came out when I was seventeen, and after that I published 10 volumes of Afrikaans poetry and then two children's books with rhymes. This was followed by one little novel, before I published *Country of My Skull* and now *A Change of Tongue*.

EB: How did you start writing? Was there something specific that propelled you into it?

AK: Part of the book is the narrative of finding a voice within a particular community, within a particular language. In my days you had school journals that published the best essays and poems and jokes, and you also had national publications that asked for contributions from school children. So there was a lot of peer readership, which I find a bit lacking now. It's as if young people are discouraged to publish early and not much attention is given to anybody who publishes early.

EB: To somebody who has never read any of your work, how would you describe it? Is there something specific that inspires it?

AK: The Afrikaans poetry, which has also been translated into English, is basically a lot of love poetry, in every volume, in other words everything from kind of teenage love poetry to middle age love poetry. There's also political material in all of them. Also, being a mother or being a daughter, being a housewife. And then the act of writing poetry also comes in, when and how to, what to do when it doesn't happen, and so on. And the love of the land is always there.

EB: A Change of Tongue is your first novel since Country of My Skull in 1998. Why did you take so long to write again? What was your motivation behind writing this novel?

AK: I wasn't actually realizing what I was doing, I was asked to write and comment on now, and people changing. I mean the statistics were there, but I realized that that wasn't actually where the changes were visible. I was also wondering why whites were saying everything has changed, and blacks were saying nothing has changed. I then realized that I was actually busy.

EB: South Africa itself is something that is very important to you, and it keeps coming up in your writing. What do you see in the future for South Africa?

AK: I think we, for a very long time, were and still are on the edge. Initially we thought if we could only get rid of PW Botha we would be fine. Then we got rid of him and then we said no, now we really need to get rid of apartheid, and then we will be fine. Then we got rid of the legislation, and we had to unban the ANC and Nelson Mandela, and then survive the change-over from Mandela to Mbeki, and every time we think 'now we will be fine'. I must say at this moment it feels to me we are a little bit further away from the edge than ever before. Economically things have settled reasonably and stabilized, but the big concern is the poverty. If we don't deal with it, and it's not only the government even though it is also their responsibility, if we don't deal with it, we will have major problems. Everyone has to benefit from the change, you can't have the same people that benefitted in the past still benefit today. Everyone must have a stake in the new, if they don't then why would they tolerate it?

EB: Tell us a bit about your choice of a title for this book.

AK: It deals with the fish on the cover that is a sole. The sole is born upright, and then to survive predators it has to go down to the bottom, and then its one side becomes the down side and the other side has to colour. Then the eye also moves over to the other side, the mouth changes, the tongue changes, and then the bone structure of the head changes, all in order to survive. So it's very much a change of sound, a change of speaking, a change of watching, seeing, listening, a change of thinking, that all of us actually have to go through. We have to sound different, you have to translate each other's texts and thoughts, so that we can get a communal text to which everybody can relate. We don't have that at this stage.

EB: Do you have a certain process or recipe when writing?

AK: It depends whether it's poetry or prose. Prose is routine work. You have to sit down and you have to do it. I find it not good to be interrupted. You can't work for three weeks and then take a week's break and do something else. You have

to keep at it. After you've been through it once you can take a break and then go back, but while you're in that flow you should stay with it. Poetry is different, it comes when it wants to. I find that I know very few people that can have a full-time job and write poetry on a solid sustained basis. You actually have to not work.

EB: What do you yourself like to read?

AK: I find that I like to read more and more non-fiction nowadays. I'm completely obsessed with reading books about this continent, especially if they are written by black people. There is such a shortage of insights from that side - how do people view landscaping, how do people view love, how do people view relationships, when you're black. There's wonderful material now coming up. Young blacks growing up, or they live in Hillbrow, what do they do, what do they talk about, what do they care about? That's fascinating.

EB: What does the future hold? Are you working on something at the moment?

AK: I'm working on old age. I find it to be a theme not dealt with by many people, and I find that men, when they have to deal with old age, they pretend they're women. I have been looking for poems on menopause, but I can't find any as yet, but when I do I will certainly make use of them.