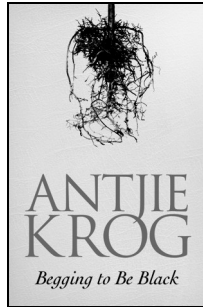


## A FEMALE NERUDA? ANTJIE KROG INTERVIEWED BY RUTH O'CALLAGHAN



photo by  
Karina Turok



*“I believe that a poet writes what her senses pick up. Mine picked up politics.”*

Antjie Krog is a poet, writer, journalist and Extraordinary Professor at the University of the Western Cape. She has been awarded many prestigious awards for non-fiction and poetry in both Afrikaans and English and has been awarded honorary doctorates from four universities.

Antjie Krog has published twelve volumes of poetry in Afrikaans, two volumes of verse for children, a short novel, a play, and two non-fiction books in English: *Country of my Skull*, on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and *A Change of Tongue* about the transformation in South Africa after ten years.

Her works have been translated into English, Dutch, Italian, French, Spanish, Swedish, Serbian and Arabic. Her book *Country of my Skull* is being widely recommended at universities as part of the curriculum dealing with writing about the past. She was also asked to translate the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, into Afrikaans.

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ROC: An early poem, published in a school magazine, envisaged black and white freely mixing together. What prompted this, for then, unusual attitude?

AK: I was sixteen years old and this was a logical attitude – one that even a child could see. At that age I had read from Auden and Camus to Zola because I suffered heavily from hay fever as an adolescent and took medication that had me sleeping during the summer days. By night I was wide awake and systematically read through my mother’s extensive library of world literature, hence the tone of my writing was confident.

ROC: How has politics affected your poetry?

AK: I believe that a poet writes what her senses pick up. Mine picked up the politics. My work had been political right from the beginning, but also political in terms of being female, being a lover, a mother, a poet etc. yet my style and way of publication stayed very western and middle class. During the late eighties I became involved in a black-run writers’ association and started to perform and give workshops in the townships. I describe in *A Change of Tongue* how I had to get used to ‘perform’ a poem in languages other than my mother tongue and shout them with rhythm and anger over a megaphone. The book also deals with how poetry was used during the struggle times while I was writing.

ROC: You live in a multi-lingual society with eleven official languages and five unofficial ones and, additionally, with English being the language of commerce and science. How does such linguistic

diversity affect the poetry of South Africa?

AK: Our multilingualism is perhaps our strongest trademark. I find it highly enriching. I executed a project in which I translated poetry from these eleven languages into English, working with small committees on the best poems from each of these languages. But one is deeply grateful that there is at least one language in which we who have been divided for so long can find one another – although that is not quite true as English is very much the language of the elite, of those with better education and middle class prospects. It is also a shame that we didn't incorporate the wonderful culture of the Dutch: speaking four to five languages and translating.

Translation is for me essential. Not necessarily for my own work, but to enrich one another with the wonders that come from other languages and rhythms. You will never forget it when you hear a poem in Xhosa, when you hear Paul Celan reading his poems in German but understand them through translation; your world has become infinitely precious. I am always disappointed when I attend poetry readings where everything is in English.

ROC: How integrated is South African poetry within the broader African poetry community?

AK: South African poetry is the only poetry which carries a South African-ness; most of the other poetry carries an Afrikaansness, a Zulu-ness, a Xhosa-ness etc. which of course are all South African, but often get stuck there.

ROC: You have been called the Pablo Neruda of South African poetry. How far would you say that this is justified? Has he been an influence upon you?

AK: I think it was said more in terms of being popular with young people and lovers than about style.

ROC: Is there a difference between men and women's poetry? Is this difference the same whether the poem is written in Afrikaans or one of the other South African languages?

AK: I think there is a big difference, but not in terms of that a man wrote this and a woman wrote that, but it is more a question of style. So I want to say that John M Coetzee writes like a woman and Nadine Gordimer writes like a man. There was a period in my writing where I was striving towards that male voice and achieved that, but I am now deliberately resisting it.

ROC: Thank you.

AK: Thank you.



Ruth O'Callaghan, a Hawthornden Fellow, competition adjudicator, interviewer, reviewer, editor and mentor, tutors on poetry courses in the UK and abroad and hosts two poetry venues in London. Translated into five languages she was awarded an Arts Council grant to visit Mongolia to collaborate with women poets on a book, a C.D. and a website. Both her first two collections have completely sold out. Her new collection *Goater's Alley* (Shoestring) was published in March 2010.