



# Language, education, and transformation in Bianca Marais's *Hum If You Don't Know the Words*

Gail Fincham

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In this article, I analyse Bianca Marais's debut novel *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* (2017). I consider first its relation to the historical events of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, and then examine its methods of composition. The issue precipitating the Soweto Uprising, when hundreds of black schoolchildren were gunned down by the police, was the refusal of blacks in Soweto to be taught in Afrikaans rather than in their home languages. Their revolt was both tragic and triumphant: tragic because of the sacrifice of young lives, triumphant because it marked Sowelans' new power to insist on their ownership of language. In the spirit of this linguistic autonomy, Marais celebrates the power of language to create intercultural and intergenerational encounters, scripting dialogue which marries social diversity with linguistic elasticity. In this marriage her writing is strongly consonant with the work of the Russian linguist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, whose text *Art and Answerability* examines the ethics of writing and helps the reader to piece together the agency of the implied author. Searching for the perspectives of the implied author reveals Marais's political activism as well as her mastery of dialogue. Her novel belongs to the tradition created by writers in the 1970s and 1980s—when apartheid was in full force—to anticipate a post-apartheid world. Marais's novel illustrates a political, cultural, and linguistic reinvention through its manipulation of narrative. **Keywords:** Soweto Uprising 1976, language ownership, Bakhtin's *Art and Answerability*, implied author, narrative manipulation anticipating post-apartheid world.

### Introduction: Historical background

Bianca Marais's debut novel *Hum If You Don't Know the Words*, published in 2017, is a *bildungsroman*—a story of courage, growth, and change—rooted in the tragedy of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Drawing on one of the most violent events in South Africa's apartheid history, Marais scripts two narrators—a nine-year-old white child, Robin Conrad, from the mining town of Boksburg near Johannesburg, and a middle-aged black schoolteacher, Beauty Mbali, from the Transkei. After Robin's parents are murdered during the Riots, Beauty, who has travelled to Johannesburg to search for her daughter, Nomsa, is hired to look after the orphaned child. Although an experienced schoolteacher, Beauty accepts this domestic work in order to earn the pass that will allow her to remain in Johannesburg while she searches for Nomsa. Despite its evolution amid the most oppressive manifestations of an apartheid-divided society, the relationship that develops between Robin and Beauty challenges the racism with which Robin has been brought up and results in a form of communication struggling to free itself from the social and racial oppressions of apartheid. That this novel should be a *bildungsroman* rather than a trauma narrative, considering the tragedy from which it is born, is remarkable.

Reported in many newspapers around the world, the Soweto Riots of 1976, represented by the photograph of a dying Hector Pietersen in the arms of his weeping siblings, caused international shock waves. The following is a journalist's account: During the early hours of 16 June 1976, thousands of schoolchildren marched in Soweto in protest against a government instruction that Afrikaans had to be used as one of the media of tuition in secondary schools. They were fired on by police [...] Enraged by the use of force to smash a peaceful protest, the students went on the rampage. (Holland 6–7)

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Holland reports that by the end of the first week one hundred and fifty lives had been lost in Soweto alone. By October the following year seven hundred people had died in countrywide anti-apartheid protests. Over 90 per cent of the dead were younger than twenty-three years.

The student Uprising of 1976 resulted not only in the sacrifice of many lives, but in political power for black youth: “1976 marks a key transition point from which stage political activism became a prominent feature of the lives of many young South Africans. This trend intensified in the 1980’s as youth engaged the state in their schools and colleges, and on the streets” (Finchilescu and Dawes 99).

However, the students’ new power resulting from the 1976 Uprising was bought at a heavy price. During the 1980’s the ANC and its protest movements urged schoolchildren to vacate their desks. Thousands of Sowetan schoolchildren, chanting the slogan “Liberation Before Education”, abandoned the inferior schooling offered them by the government. These young people, “ordinary citizens swept up by the tidal wave of history” (Apte 53), became a lost generation.

The precipitating cause of the Soweto Uprising of 1976 was the government’s demand that students in Black schools be taught in Afrikaans rather than in indigenous languages. This was the final insult on top of the system of overcrowded schools and under-qualified teachers which meant that almost no black pupils achieved Matric—3% as opposed to 70% amongst white pupils (Holland 57). Yet the Uprising also created a sense of camaraderie that was subsequently lost. In the words of social activist Bongi Mkhabela, “1976 was beautiful rather than sad. You saw the collective consciousness of a community, its togetherness; workers, kids, teachers all going the same way forward, together. They may not have had academic ways of articulating where they were going, but they all knew. They knew what was frustrating them: the Bantu Education system” (Mkhabela qtd in Holland 62).

*Hum If You Don’t Know the Words* is built around the events of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. In Marais’s novel, Robin Conrad’s parents are murdered during the Uprising, Beauty comforts dying schoolchildren fired upon by the police, and Beauty’s daughter Nomsa, sent to Johannesburg to complete her education, joins the thousands of young people in Soweto who abandon their apartheid-blighted education. Subsequently, she joins uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the movement of young people committed to the armed struggle who are trained outside the country by the ANC. The ethical issues of this commitment are foregrounded in the letter Beauty sends to Robin:

It does not matter how often I am told that Nomsa is where she wants to be and what a good soldier she is. I know my daughter. I know that under the passion and the aggression beats a heart that knows the difference between right and wrong; a conscience that will grapple with the implications of bombing train stations and municipal buildings; a heart that will question the morality of hurting innocent people to make a political statement. (*Hum If You Don’t Know the Words* 394)

Nomsa’s letter to her mother confirms the moral awareness of which Beauty has written:

I know that in order to be an effective soldier, I need to completely turn my back on you and everything you have ever taught me. There are things that need to be done, terrible things, and many people will be killed. The few acts I have already committed keep me awake at night, and make me question who I am and the person I am becoming. It is my greatest fear that one day I will wake up and be someone you would not recognise, or even worse, someone you could not love. (*Hum* 405–6)

Marais’s creation of Nomsa’s story registers the shift that has occurred in the implementation of sabotage by uMkhonto we Sizwe since its creation by Nelson Mandela. Mandela writes:

Since the ANC had been reluctant to embrace violence at all, it made sense to start with the form of violence that inflicted the least harm against individuals: sabotage.

Because it did not involve loss of life, it offered the best hope for reconciliation among the races afterwards. We did not want to start a blood-feud between white and black. Animosity between Afrikaner and Englishman was still sharp fifty years after the Anglo-Boer war: what would race relations be like between white and black if we provoked a civil war? Sabotage had the added virtue of requiring the least manpower. (336)

Stephen Watson comments: “liberation movements seldom create liberatory (still less libertarian) cultures if only because their struggles demand a high degree of conformity, as well as suppression of individual dissent—precisely the habits of mind that are inimical to any real flourishing of the arts” (160). Nomsa’s story in Marais’s novel dramatizes the conflict between political commitment and humanitarian awareness facing MK members.

But the passion for knowledge amongst black schoolchildren can transcend this conflict, leading to a healing connection between individuals as well as to the boycotting of inferior education. Marais depicts a creative friendship between the white Robin and the black Asanda. Rooted in humanistic encounter, reciprocity, and respect, this friendship has little to do with formal education:

Asanda and I had more in common than any other person I'd ever met. We both liked kwela music and loved to dance. We'd both had a twin sibling who we'd lost, and we both spied on people and acted like detectives. Both of us loved learning new languages and we both respected Beauty and wanted to do right by her. Each of us was also trying to make things right in our own way. In another time and place, Asanda and I could have been best friends; in another lifetime, he could have been my boyfriend. (*Hum* 400)

### Approaching the novel

*Hum If You Don't Know the Words* belongs to the tradition of novels set in the South Africa of the 1970s and 1980s—when apartheid was its most oppressive—that anticipate a post-apartheid world. Most striking here are André Brink's *A Dry White Season* and Miriam Tlali's *Amandla*, both drawing on the events of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. Another example of a text powerfully anticipating political freedom is J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*. The novel's continuing importance is reflected in the fact of its adaptation as a theatrical and multi-media presentation incorporating the Handspring Puppets and playing at the Baxter Theatre in February/March 2022. Like the texts mentioned, *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* dramatises the power of language to alter consciousness in intercultural and intergenerational encounters. It graphically illustrates Njabulo Ndebele's claim that: "In few countries in the contemporary world do we have a living example of people reinventing themselves through narrative" (Ndebele 27).

Writing about the consciousness created by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that accompanied the transition to democracy, Ndebele remarks: "What seems to have happened is that the passage of time which brought forth our freedom has given legitimacy and authority to previously silenced voices" (20). While this is not the forum to consider the morality of the TRC—the issue of forgiveness in exchange for confession of crimes against humanity—it is incontestable that the years of the TRC hearings created a new space for previously silenced voices. Ndebele speaks of "the movement of our society from repression to expression" (20). Marais's novel captures the first impulses of this movement twenty years before the TRC hearings. She gives speech to such "previously silenced voices" as Beauty Mbali's Sowetan family, the thousands of black schoolchildren determined to escape state control, and the racially mixed collection of independent-minded people who befriend Robin in Yeoville. Referring, like Ndebele, to previously silenced voices such as these, Brink remarks: "fiction writers who wish to return to the silent or silenced landscapes of the past have to tune in to the new perceptions of what constitutes history" ("Stories of history: reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative" 32). This history in Marais's novel, though it predates the transition to democracy by two decades, illustrates the development of a strong resistant subjectivity that counters the tyrannies of apartheid.

In "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom" Albie Sachs writes: "What we have to ask ourselves now is whether we have an artistic and cultural vision that corresponds to this current phase in which a new South African nation is emerging [...] [instead of being] trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination" (246). Marais's novel, published in 2017, looks back to the South Africa of the 1970s and 1980s when freedom from state control seemed impossible. Yet her protagonists are able to shape a new "artistic and cultural vision" that counters "the ghettos of the apartheid imagination". Her novel illustrates the power of language to create new realities through dialogue despite the oppressions of apartheid. This political agenda co-exists with literary naturalism; as Kelly Hart contends, Marais's dialogue is "engaging, reveals character, enhances plot and also sounds natural".

I turn now to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theorisation about language helps us to understand the socio-linguistic transformations depicted in Marais's novel. Explaining why Bakhtin's work remains important to writers and readers, Pam Morris remarks: "At the centre of all his thinking is an innovative and dynamic perception of language. Due largely to the impact of structuralist linguistics and subsequent development of deconstructionist theory, a concern with language as production of meaning has been pushed to the centre of twentieth-century Western epistemology" (Morris 1).

Bakhtin tells us that a writer's ability to use language creatively depends on understanding and responding to the words of others:

For the prose artist the world is full of other people's words, among which he must orientate himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed. He works with a very rich verbal palette. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 201)

My reading of *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* centres on Marais's use of language shaped by a speaker's dynamic relationship to her or his environment. The way this relationship is shaped alerts us to the (concealed) manipulations of the author. To investigate the structure of Marais's novel, I use the concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia which Bakhtin formulated in 1941, as well as turning to his preoccupations with the work of the writer in his earlier book *Art and Answerability* (1919), which addresses the structure of a text as it is conceived by the author.<sup>1</sup>

Given that language is dynamic for Bakhtin, with new and unpredictable meanings constantly arising out of the dialogism and heteroglossia of speakers' interactions, meanings are not determined by Marais's authorial control over her novel. Her presence is all but invisible in her text, so that as readers we can only guess at how she manipulates her storyline. We are dealing here with the concept of the implied author, where we as readers collaborate in unlocking the text's meanings. Jeremy Hawthorn explains:

The term [implied author] has entered into current critical vocabulary and is used to refer to that picture of a creating author behind a literary work that the reader builds up on the basis of elements in (or reading experiences of) a literary work. [...] Seymour Chatman argues that what we get from the concept of the implied author "is a way of naming and analysing the textual intent of narrative fictions under a single term but without recourse to biographism". (Hawthorn 25)

To Hawthorn's description of the implied author above should be added that authors write themselves into their texts in many ways. As readers we hunt for elements in the novel that speak to the implied author's concealed though not completely invisible presence.

It is this "way of naming and analyzing [...] textual intent" defined by Chatman that I undertake in juxtaposing aspects of Marais's novel against Bakhtin's *Art and Answerability*, an early Bakhtin text which explores and clarifies the functions of the author. Bakhtin writes that "language is not self-evident and is not in itself incontestable [...] it is uttered in a heteroglot environment [...] such a language must be championed, purified, defended, motivated" ("Discourse in the Novel" 332). I turn now to this defence and motivation originally put forward in *Art and Answerability* and suggest ways in which this text illuminates the power of language in Marais's novel. I focus on three topics in *Art and Answerability*, namely: *the excess of seeing*, *sympathetic co-experiencing*, and *love and growth*, the latter topic taken from the section entitled "The Inner and the Outer Body" in Bakhtin's text. I first quote Bakhtin's explanation of these terms, and then suggest their relevance for *Hum If You Don't Know the Words*. *Art and Answerability* is illuminating for the reader because it maps a "consummating consciousness" governing the construction of the whole text. Suddenly we glimpse what none of Marais's protagonists can, on their own, show us: the interplay between political control and creative freedom. This interplay can only become apparent from a position "outside" the novel, a position that none of its characters can command.

### **Marais's *Hum If You Don't Know the Words* through Bakhtin's *Art and Answerability***

#### ***The excess of seeing***

A central concept governing the author's manipulation of a novel is what Bakhtin calls "the excess of seeing". While Marais's novel shows us how her characters view the world, this seeing is always enclosed within the author's wider vision. Bakhtin remarks:

The excess of my seeing must "fill in" the horizon of the other human being who is being contemplated, must render his horizon complete, without at the same time forfeiting his distinctiveness. I must empathise or project myself into this other human being, see his world axiologically from within him as he sees this world. I must put myself in his place and then, after returning to my own place, "fill in" his horizon through that excess of seeing which opens out from this, my own, place outside him. I must enframe him, create a consummating environment for him out of this excess of my own seeing, knowing, desiring, and feeling. (*Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* 25)

Marais creates two very different narrators to dramatise her story of growth and change: a nine-year-old white child and a middle-aged black school teacher. Their alternating narrations draw the reader into their disparate

worlds. Robin comes from the middle-class white mining town of Boksburg on the Reef; Beauty's home is in a rural thatched Transkei village which she leaves to travel to Soweto in her search for Nomsa. Eventually, after twenty-nine chapters of alternating separate narrations, Robin and Beauty meet and talk; their discussions change Robin's world-view.

In the opening two chapters, Marais as implied author has to accomplish an ideological feat: to involve the reader in both narrators' "distinctiveness" so that they are convincingly individuated, but also to signal some problematic areas of their consciousness. Robin is an energetic and intelligent child, a tomboy who wants nothing so much as to be part of the games played by Boksburg's Afrikaans-speaking boys. She cannot identify with girls her own age because they imitate their mothers' preoccupations with cooking and babies. An only child, Robin is particularly aware that she frequently doesn't fulfil her parents' expectations, so she invents an imaginary twin sister with whom she frequently talks and plays. Marais "enframes" Robin and "creates a consummating environment" for her by showing the reader her youth, energy, and near-total lack of understanding of the racial, linguistic, and gender constraints that characterise her politically fractured home situation. Because she is only nine years old, the reader accepts this lack of understanding.

The case with Beauty is very different, as befits a highly educated protagonist. Beauty is fiercely loyal to her rural community in the Transkei, stressing how different their values are to those of white city-dwelling South Africans. She describes her thatched rondavel as follows:

Our homes are borderless just as the world was once free of boundaries; there would be no walls or roofs at all except for the essential shelter they provide. Privacy is not a concept my people understand or desire; we bear witness to each other's lives and take comfort in having our own lives seen. What greater gift can you give another than to say: I see you, I hear you, and you are not alone? (12)

But Marais brings home to the reader the "boundaries" and "borders" of Beauty's Transkei by telling her story in the present tense throughout. Robin's story, by contrast, is told in the past, the tense of completed action. As Rayyan Al-Shawaf comments in a *Toronto Star* review of the novel, Beauty's present-tense narration conveys a sense of immediacy. It also, and perhaps more importantly, signals Marais's recognition that, because of apartheid, the Transkei has a damaged past and an uncertain future. This is because the South African regime has never compensated the homeland's inhabitants for drought, flood, soil erosion, or diseases which destroy livestock. Beauty, like many other women in her community, is left alone after her family's cattle die, a single mother to her daughter and two remaining sons. Her husband Silumko becomes a miner in Johannesburg, labouring in appalling conditions for eleven months of every year in order to support his family. These facts emerge as Beauty teaches Robin about her life. Yet despite hardship, loss, and grief, Beauty never ceases to rejoice in her trips home:

I look out over the place of my birth and my spirits lift for the first time in many weeks. I am happy to trade in the electricity, running water and plumbing of the city for this rural landscape where water must be fetched from the stream, cooking is done over fires and only a candle can cast light into the darkest shadows. It is a place where time stands still. (249)

This excerpt draws our attention to the ideological complexity of the implied author's stance. Marais lives in the city of Toronto and writes this novel for a South African audience, mostly city-dwelling whites. But at the time her text is set, this readership, with the few exceptions of political activists working to improve the lives of black people, is largely unaware of its privilege. Black people are employed as maids and gardeners with very little understanding on their employers' part of the hardships they endure under apartheid. Beauty, travelling from the Transkei to Johannesburg, may not use toilets on her journey because these are reserved for whites, and must carry a pass at all times or risk imprisonment. Urbanisation thus holds no allure for her. Perhaps this is why, in contrast to the "maids and madams" ethnography of Johannesburg, Beauty's classless community in the Transkei is portrayed so positively.

Is Marais's idealisation of the rural Transkei, site of erosion, poverty, and loss, intended to challenge the values of urban whites within a capitalist economy where many black people still work as servants? Or does she want, like J. M. Coetzee, to deconstruct the binary between "high European culture" and "so-called primitive cultures"? Coetzee writes:

What structuralism did for me—and here I have in mind anthropological structuralism and Jakobson’s work on folk poetry—was to collapse dramatically the distance between high European culture and so-called primitive cultures. It became clear that fully as much *thinking* went into the production of primitive cultures. Human culture was human culture, unchanging, more or less, beneath the changing forms of its expression. (24)

We know that Beauty, as a highly educated protagonist, is a thinking person. But what her affection for the Transkei—to which she will return with Nomisa at the end of the novel—*means* is not spelled out by the implied author, whose “excess of seeing” contains puzzles which readers will solve in different ways.

A less cryptic example of the implied author’s “filling in” of the horizon of a character occurs in Beauty’s narration of the office room hidden behind the bookshelf panels in the library of the activist Maggie’s Houghton house. Here the author empathises with, and projects herself into, Beauty’s consciousness. Highly educated and familiar for years with the words and actions of Mandela, she has been prevented by apartheid from seeing any images of him:

As I move farther along the wall, I skim past dozens of photographs that, if discovered by the police, would incriminate my hosts to such an extent that no trial would ever be required to send them both to prison. I keep scanning until I notice a photo I have never seen before. [...] Maggie is much younger in it and she is standing next to a tall, handsome black man who looks to be in his thirties or forties. [...] He looks familiar but I cannot place him, and I assume that he is an American actor or politician [...] “Who is he?” [...] “That’s Rolihlahla Mandela” [...] “The village where he grew up is very close to mine. I have heard so many tales about him, such great stories about such a great man, but I have never seen what he looks like.” “Well. I suppose that’s to be expected with the ban on reproducing his image. That’s exactly what the government wants”. (Hum 168)

Visual representations of political leaders familiar to the white reader but censored during apartheid from a black readership are here clearly described in the implied author’s “excess of seeing”. This visualises a space of secrecy and subterfuge to escape apartheid censorship. While the functioning of such censorship is familiar to readers, what is more difficult to understand is how this censorship can be implemented. Publications for black people may be forced to omit politically rousing visual material. But what about posters and television, or printed material in the white houses where black servants work? Are wealthy white activists like Maggie and her husband Andrew not able to buy off police should they find censored images in their possession? Can they not bribe them with expensive imported alcohol and tobacco as they did when Beauty was held up for not carrying a pass? Here the implied author’s “excess of seeing” is infiltrated by her “knowing, desiring and feeling”. These sentiments register the enormity of state censorship. Fortunately, such censorship cannot be as effective as the architects of apartheid desired.

### ***Sympathetic co-experiencing***

The author, by definition outside the text, enacts what Bakhtin calls *sympathetic co-experiencing* with the characters of a novel: “a sympathetically co-experienced life is the life of another human being, (his outer as well as his *inner* life) that is essentially experienced *from outside*” (*Art and Answerability* 82). A heart-rending example of the implied author’s “sympathetic co-experiencing” occurs when Beauty comforts the wounded and dying children in the River of Blood caused by police brutality during the Riots. The children are completely alone; not even their parents know what has happened to them. Beauty promises that their mothers love them and will come to them, and their responses are no less poignant for being matter-of-fact:

*Zanele*. Twelve years old. She is bleeding from the ear. *Goodness*. Her lips tremble and her tears are hot against my skin but she still manages a smile. *Kidebone*. Her lips are shiny with Vaseline. *Jabu*. Fourteen years old. He is the man of the house after his father died in a rockfall underground. *Fumani*. Wonders if I am an angel. *Thandeka*. Asks if I have seen her younger sister. *Sipho*. Has never met his father. *Kleinboy*. Says he is late for school. (Hum 42)

This exchange imagined by the implied author is heard by nobody except Beauty and the reader.

A happier example of the implied author’s “sympathetic co-experiencing” is the sequence in which Robin is given a surprise party on her tenth birthday:

Almost everyone who mattered most to me was in the same room. Beauty (smiling broadly), Morrie (hair more poofy than usual), Mrs Goldman (bearing gifts), Victor (wearing an aquamarine bow tie because I'd told him once that aquamarine was my favorite color), Johan (minus his stitches), Wilhelmina (no longer a baddie!), and Maggie (no longer my only guardian angel). Black, white, homosexual, hetero-sexual, Christian, Jew, Englishman, Afrikaner, adult, child, man, woman: we were all there together, but somehow that eclectic jumble of labels was overwritten by the one classification that applied to every person there: "friend". (277)

Here the reader is aware of a commentary too sophisticated to be composed by a ten-year-old. The syntax, such as constructing affectionate descriptive parentheses, expressive phrases like "eclectic jumble of labels" and the ability to construct conceptual contrasts such as homosexual/hetero-sexual, when neither term is clear to Robin, alert us to the presence of the implied author.

In this author-dominated passage, we are made aware of the previously silenced voices of which Ndebele and Brink write. Marais's novel gives voice to a number of remarkable individuals whose lifestyles have no legitimacy within apartheid but whose friendships with Robin change her world. First, there is her mentor Beauty, from whom she learns to question everything she has been taught about class and race. Morrie Goldman, removed from school because of anti-semitism, now lives at home and strikes up a close friendship with Robin; they have many very funny conversations about Judaism. Then there is the Afrikaans-speaking social worker Wilhelmina whose liberal politics have resulted in her husband's mysterious death. She comes to Robin's assistance when the child develops scarlet fever and Beauty, *in loco parentis*, cannot as a black servant take her to hospital. Victor, member of a gay fraternity, teaches Robin that running away is never an option, no matter how barbarously one has been treated. Finally, the white activist Maggie, who works to protect blacks from apartheid, runs constant risks to her own safety. As a reviewer remarks, the members of Robin's and Beauty's circles are "alternately funny, warm and intriguing, yet because they are Jewish or gay or simply progressive in their views, they are outcasts in this intolerant society" (Jones). Yet it is these "outcasts" who dominate the novel and shape Robin's *bildungsroman*. As Brink writes, "History provides one of the most fertile silences to be revisited by South African writers, not because no voices have traversed it before, but because the dominant discourse of white historiography [...] has inevitably silenced, for so long, so many other possibilities" (Brink "Interrogating silence: new possibilities faced by South African literature" 22). Marais's novel substitutes for history's "fertile silences" the courageous and engaged voices of the friends who celebrate Robin's surprise birthday party.

### **Love and growth**

Bakhtin writes of the importance of parental love for a child's development:

The words of a loving human being are the first and the most authoritative about him; they are the words that for the first time determine his personality from outside, the words that come to meet his indistinct inner sensation of himself, giving it a form and a name in which, for the first time, he finds himself and becomes aware of himself as a *something*. Words of love and acts of genuine concern come to meet the dark chaos of my inner sensation of myself: they name, direct, satisfy, and connect it with the outside world. (*Art* 49–50)

But Robin has lost these "words of love and acts of genuine concern" because both her parents have been killed. How is she to develop in the absence of the formative words which "name, direct, satisfy and connect [her] with the outside world"? It is in this context of loss and grief that we are shown most clearly the power of language, and the agency of the implied author. Marais, writing a *bildungsroman*, must move Robin beyond the elaborate charade centring on clothes, decorations, and gimmicks she enacts with her aunt Edith after her parents' death in order to avoid remembering and speaking of them. She must learn to mourn. But Robin does not yet understand that loss, grief, and mourning are universal experiences: "Later in life when I became acquainted with psychology textbooks, I was surprised to discover that there was a whole branch of study dedicated to what I'd experienced; it wasn't the unknowable pit I'd thought it was" (134). While Robin must still learn to grieve, Marais has thought a great deal about death and mourning: "My experience of grief is that [it] isn't something you get over [...] It isn't a process you go through to come out healed on the other side [...] the best you can hope for is to learn to live with it so that the burden of it gets easier to carry with time" (Marais and Johnson).

If parental love is what stabilises an individual, Robin is initially unable to access it. Deeply traumatised after the deaths of her parents, she cannot make herself remember or speak of them. It is only when Robin at last visits

the Yeoville library that she confronts the fact of her orphanhood, suddenly realising that she has no parents to sign for her: “So I did then what I hadn’t done in the six weeks since I lost my parents; I surrendered and gave in to my grief, and I sobbed like the frightened and abandoned child I was” (*Hum* 195).

This collapse is the first step towards Robin’s learning to mourn her parents’ death. The implied author shows us that mourning must be learned, its enactment dependent on both auditory and visual cues. Robin listens to the Dolly Parton album which contains the song “Jolene” to access her mourning, as the song shares her mother’s name: “It didn’t matter that the song was about a woman who didn’t look like my mother at all. It also didn’t matter that it was about a woman taking another woman’s man. I was enthralled with it and relieved that I could get to howl my mother’s name over and over again in a socially acceptable context” (204).

The implied author also leads Robin to mourning her father by drawing the shapes he found on her face: “I re-created the constellations that my father had found hidden among my freckles: the Big Dipper (looking like a kite trailing a piece of string), the Southern Cross (the easiest to draw) and Orion’s Belt (requiring the most freckles of all)” (204). Through these author-assisted rehearsals of mourning, Robin is led closer to the moment that she will, with Beauty’s encouragement, be able to speak directly to her parents: “Mommy and Daddy, I miss you very much”. She finishes: “I want you to know that I’m happy and I’m very well taken care of. So you should be happy too. I love you very much” (329). These simple but heartfelt words mark a turning point in Robin’s acceptance of her parents’ death. They are made possible by the way in which the implied author has afforded the child access to auditory and visual memories.

Could Marais have based these dramatisations of memory on her own reading of Jacques Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning*? In the essay entitled “Roland Barthes”, Derrida writes of the expressive power of a photograph:

The Winter Garden Photograph: the invisible *punctum* of the book. It does not belong to the corpus of photographs [Barthes] exhibits, to the series of examples he displays and analyzes. Yet it irradiates the entire book. A sort of radiant serenity comes from his mother’s eyes, whose brightness or clarity he describes, though we never see. The radiance composes with the wound that signs the book, with an invisible *punctum*. At this point, he is no longer speaking of light or of photography; he is seeing to something else, the voice of the other, the accompaniment, the song, the “last music”. (43)

Bakhtin writes: “[w]ords of love and acts of genuine concern come to meet the chaos of my inner sensation of myself” (*Art* 50). Beauty has given Robin a “heart-shaped locket [...] [with] black-and-white pictures inside: my dad’s face [...] on the left and my mother’s on the right [...] the photos [...] taken on their wedding day” (*Hum* 256). The implied author here scripts a further cue to grieving, in addition to the Dolly Parton song Robin listens to incessantly, and her recreation of her father’s drawings using her freckles. These cues assist Beauty in teaching the child how to grieve. She moves from a photograph to “the voice of the other, the accompaniment, the song, the ‘last music’” (Derrida 43). That Robin does not yet fully apprehend the significance of this music and this drawing diminishes neither their power nor their ability to speak to her grief.

## Conclusion

Guided by Bakhtin’s *Art and Answerability*, I have investigated some of Marais’s positions as implied author in *Hum If You Don’t Know the Words*. If language issues—the government’s refusal to allow black schoolchildren to learn in their own languages—precipitated both the tragedy and the triumph of the 1976 Riots, Marais’s text begins to suggest a new potential of language to bring communities together. Bakhtin tells us that a protagonist’s “consciousness [...] feeling and [...] desire of the world [...] are enclosed on all sides, as if within a band, by the author’s consummating consciousness” (*Art* 13). Approaching this “consummating consciousness” by searching for the implied author is potentially illuminating for the reader because it results in a perspective outside the novel, a perspective not available to any of its characters. We are shown how Marais as implied author creates a *bildungsroman* which celebrates individuals’ ability to transcend apartheid. Brink writes:

I recognise the regenerative powers of South African literature: not simply to escape from the inhibitions of apartheid but to construct and deconstruct new possibilities; to activate the imagination in its exploration of those silences previously inaccessible; to play with the future on that needlepoint where it meets past and present; and to be willing to risk everything in the leaping flame of the word as it turns into world. (“Interrogating silence” 27)

This is surely a fitting tribute to Marais’s novel as she turns words into world.

## Notes

1. I append definitions of the central Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia, and a brief explanation of why they are less useful to my analysis than the concept of the implied author developed in *Art and Answerability*. Dialogism: “Every utterance is the product of the interaction between speakers and the product of the broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance emerges” (Volosinov 41). Heteroglossia: “refers to the conflict between ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’, ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ discourses within the same national language [...] Every utterance contains within it the trace of other utterances, both in the past and in the future” (Morris, “A Glossary of Key Terms” 248–9). The concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia can only offer partial keys to our understanding of Marais’s text because if all utterances contain the traces of other utterances, “both in the past and in the future”, they must also stage warring ideologies. In short, they must embody contradiction. While these terms register the interactions of speakers’ words within any text, the concept of the implied author is, by definition, outside the text, so must be separate from the words of any character.

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