

Terry Morris

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Tribute

Chris van Wyk (1957–2014)



The speakers at Chris van Wyk's memorial service, held at the Johannesburg City Hall, on 9th October 2014, so aptly placed Chris and his body of poetry, short stories, memoirs and children's stories within South Africa's literary canon and also as a part of the generation of writers I like to think of as the 76'ers. Our story came later ...

The women in Chris's life underpin the ten years that we at Pan Macmillan published many of his books. These are women that we and Chris's readers got to know well, either in person or woven into the pages of his books. Almost every book we published with Chris introduced us to another influential female figure in his life. First of course was his mother Shirley in *Shirley Goodness & Mercy* (2004), then Ouma Ruby, his grandmother in *Ouma Ruby's Secret* (2006), followed closely by Agnes in *Eggs to Lay Chickens to Hatch* (2010), and of course throughout the period—his beloved wife Kathy. As if Chris didn't have enough forceful women surrounding him, along came Andrea Natrass and myself, his publishers, who henpecked him and forced numerous deadlines on him. Chris could dodge a deadline masterfully, launching into yet another hilarious story or relating the latest *skinder*, all serious work completely forgotten. I was banned from discussing deadlines with him by our publisher because we'd spend hours debating and discussing the state of the nation, politics or enthusing about books we'd read and of course there would be no manuscript in hand by the time I had left the house. Gerald de Villiers, the ex MD of Hodder which bought Ravan Press concurred and reminded us of the many missed deadlines accompanied by a smile and a laugh from Chris (and a grimace from the publisher).

Chris literally exploded into our lives at Pan Macmillan publishers in 2004 when we launched *Shirley Goodness & Mercy* as the lead title of our new Picador Africa series. Many of the old Ravan Press classics he had worked on were re-issued at the same time and it seemed as though his DNA was imprinted on most of the books we published in that first year. Chris had edited, commissioned and worked with many of the Ravan Press writers throughout his time at *Staffrider* and thereafter. He was well-respected because of his incisive skill with words and language and well-loved

because of his larger than life personality. His laugh, warm presence, humour and sharp perceptive wit drew us to him.

Shirley Goodness & Mercy was instantly loved, discussed, reviewed and Chris was in demand to speak to audiences. The book was adapted as a radio broadcast on SAFM, adapted by Janice Honeyman into an award-winning play, used as a setwork at schools, rights sold to Pan Macmillan UK and many reprints done. The book was shortlisted for the Alan Paton award. Chris was the perfect speaker and regaled many audiences with his hilarious tales and storytelling. At one of the literary dinners hosted by Jenny Crwys-Williams where the wine flowed and everyone was enamoured with Chris, a few of the women insisted on having their photos taken seated on Chris's lap. Rather embarrassed and blushing, he turned to a staff member at the end of the evening and remarked ... "phew but I felt like Hugh Hefner for the night".

Chris's bad eyesight meant that he never drove but this brought people closer to him in many ways—if you wanted to meet with Chris you had to have the meeting either at his home in Riverlea or later in Northcliff (he often remarked that he'd gone to live with the "Iarneys"). Often Kathy was at the house, sometimes his sons, Kevin or Karl, and we'd drink tea, eat something, talk, laugh and a wonderful friendship developed.

In fact those who spent time driving Chris to the various events, to which the invites never stopped coming, are walking repositories of all the gossip, stories and rich anecdotes from Chris. Chris spoke so widely and met so many people he once remarked on his third visit to one of the Jewish day schools. "You know I now know every Cohen in this city".

At a sales conference one year, a staff member so enchanted by the character Ouma Ruby, Chris's grandmother, put forward the suggestion to adapt her story into a children's picture book. The book was translated into all 11 languages and went on to charm thousands of South African children across the country as *Ouma Ruby's Secret*.

In between all of this Chris began working on the adaptation of *Long Walk to Freedom* into a children's picture book. This was published internationally and is a much loved feature in many households, school libraries and classrooms.

In March 2007 the early draft of the sequel appeared in my inbox accompanied by profuse apologies for missing two years of deadlines. And so Agnes too became immortalised in *Eggs to Lay Chickens to Hatch*.

Chris was so generous with his time and his favourite speaking engagements were those addresses and readings to children. Kathy often accompanied Chris and he always mentioned her and wove her into his stories and events. Kathy's face would light up at each and every story, even though she'd heard them numerous times before. He and Kathy were so generous with their time and so warm and humorous in their interactions. Chris always gave advice and time willingly to young

and new writers throughout his life from the young Fred Khumalo, who wrote a warm tribute on Facebook, to a young scholar more recently, who tracked him down after hearing him speak at her school.

Very importantly Chris used his humour, particularly with children, to uncover the harsh reality of life growing up during apartheid be it through Madiba's story or his own from the streets of Riverlea. More than any history textbook can ever convey—through his words, Chris exposed the cruel and ridiculous tenets of this system that divided ordinary children and families across the country.

Importantly too Chris was no pushover and there were a few occasions where he quite rightly hauled us over the coals for something gone awry. It made us respect him more and certainly kept us on our toes.

I will miss the many heated political discussions we had. Chris often expressed anger at those in public office who had boarded the gravy train and reminisced about the cohesive nature and comradeship of his UDF days. He lamented too, the fall of the BC movement and structures. After editing the Wits University Press book, *We Write What we Like*, he spoke often about the importance of some of the BC leaders he had worked with.

I know that we would have seen fragments of this anger (mingled with Chris's trademark wit) threaded through his new work. Sadly we have lost a giant of a man too soon.

Thank you Kathy, Kevin and Karl for sharing him with us.