

## Hein Willemse

Hein Willemse is Professor of Literature in the Department of Afrikaans, University of Pretoria, South Africa.  
Email: hein.willemse@up.ac.za

## Tribute

# Peter Abrahams (1919-2017)

Caribbean Beat



I never had the opportunity of meeting Peter Abrahams. I only knew him through his writings. I recall the mustiness of the copies of *Wild Conquest* (1950) and *Tell Freedom* (1954) I found hidden away behind books on a shelf at a relative's house. Although the dust jackets of both were tattered the pages of *Tell Freedom* bore traces of heavy use. Not only did the latter title intrigue me but so did the palimpsests of readers past. That day I read it with increasing fervency. In

hindsight, it must have been one of the first times that I recognised some familiarity, perhaps even immediacy, in a piece of writing.

Although Abrahams writes about early-century working class life, poverty and social struggle in the city of Johannesburg there was something familiar about his descriptions, even for someone, like me living in a tranquil rural Boland town in the early 1970s. It might have been the description of poverty or the characterisation of figures similar to those that I had seen in Blikkiesdorp, the squatter camp in our town. It might have been his wrestling with ideas of social justice, his quest for a world without racial prejudice and the stirrings of political resistance that his words had awakened in me. It might have been his struggle to come to terms with his Afrikaans-speaking background and his choice for English.

Whatever it was, *Tell Freedom* changed much of my understanding of the world around me. I read about 'Negro writers' which triggered a lasting interest in African-American writing. Just like Abrahams I took pride in their achievements. I read about W. E. B. DuBois, Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Later I explored the poetry of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, and even today, whenever, I hear a Paul Robeson spiritual, I invariably recall Abrahams' enthusiasm for his deep baritone. Abrahams introduced me to proud black people in other parts of the world and to the moral decency of Marxist radicals of whatever hue. Many years later, I bought my own copy of *Tell Freedom*. The cheap news print edition by the Zimbabwe Publishing House may not have the mystique of my first encounter but its words retain the familiarity of that old musty book of my youth.

Peter Henry Abrahams Deras (also: de Ras) was born on March 19, 1919 in Johannesburg and in *Tell Freedom* (1954) he recounts the difficulties of his upbringing in the inner city slum of Vrededorp, after the death of his Ethiopian-born father: "With [my father] going, the order and stability that had been in my life, dissolved. There was no bread-winner so we had to leave the place that had been our home." (15) His life, and that of his mother, "a member of the Cape Coloured community" and a domestic worker, unravelled to such an extent that he turned into a street urchin (10). A chance encounter at age eleven with a young white woman changed his life forever when she read excerpts from Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* to him and he felt drawn to the enchanting possibilities of storytelling (150). Although his schooling was at best erratic he discovered the world of books, writing and new learning at the Bantu Men's Social Centre. Here, he "was rapidly moving out of [his] Coloured world [...], out of the reach of even [his] dear mother and sister" with English taking "the place of Afrikaans as [his] first language. [His] range of words expanded, and with it, the range of [his] thoughts" (197–8; 202). He was set to become one of the more prolific South African-born writers of the first half of the twentieth century.

Abrahams left South Africa at the age of twenty and settled for a while in Britain where he worked briefly on *The Daily Worker*, the official newspaper of the British Communist Party. In the exiled African community he met figures like the Ghanaian, Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore, a Trinidadian, and along with them co-organised the Fifth Pan Africanist Congress held in Manchester, England in 1945. This remarkable event was attended by men who later became post-independence African presidents or prominent leaders, men like Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), Isaac Wallace-Johnson (Sierra Leone), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya (Kenya). The star participant was W. E. B. DuBois, who opened the conference. According to Abrahams in his memoir *The Coyaba Chronicles*, they all knew that they "were in the presence of a great moment in black history" (46). For Abrahams this promoter of Pan Africanism was a "great scholar, [a] natural aristocrat, [a] man of taste and refinement" (9). Although he never met Marcus Garvey, who died in 1940, Abrahams thought of him as one of the key figures of black intellectual history who used powerful language to exhort black people "to self-awareness, black self-respect, black dignity, [and] black enterprise" (14). Personalities, experiences and events like these deeply influenced Abrahams and after a journalistic assignment to Jamaica, he and his family permanently relocated to the island in 1959. Here, he became a prominent radio commentator and journalist.

Abrahams' leftist views were shaped in Johannesburg and among the Trotskyists in Cape Town and Durban. His first internationally successful book, the novel *Mine Boy* (1946), bears the imprint of that period of personal development. In a memorable passage an Irish figure tells the novel's main character, a young man from a rural

backwater: "I am a man first. I want you to be a man first and then a black man. [...] When you understand that you will be a man with freedom inside your breast. It is only those who are free inside who can help free those around them." (172–3) These views, strains of them and the quest for social justice are evident in most of his later works. Among them, a novel that I set as required reading for a course on comparative South African literature in the Department of Afrikaans at the University of the Western Cape in the early 1980s. *The Path of Thunder* (1948), tells of a male teacher classified Coloured and a woman classified white, who eventually commit suicide in defence of their love, threatened by the deep racism of their environment.

In Jamaica, Abrahams found a world where he could escape the statutory racism of South Africa, and established a home, Coyoba, free from its ills; by his own account, deliberately challenging the searing words of Langston Hughes in "House in the world" (Rampersad and Roessel 138; original italics):

I'm looking for a house  
In the world  
Where the white shadows  
Will not fall.

*There is no such house,  
Dark brothers,  
No such house  
At all.*

It may be moot whether Jamaica has completely shed the remnants of colonialism and racism but no-one can fault Abrahams' steadfast idealism, as expressed once again in the concluding paragraphs of *The Coyoba Chronicles* (409): "Race and colour, in themselves, are not worth the pain and suffering they have called down on humanity in our time. [...] To the young of all colours and of all lands [...] I urge respectful recognition of your common humanity. You are all of one blood."

For many African writers and scholars Abrahams was a pivotal figure in their development. In literary courses the world over his books are still regularly prescribed, and *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom* are still in print. In South Africa though, traces of Abrahams and his writing have been waning, much of it due to his absence from the local literary scene and the neglect of his work in contemporary school and university literary courses.

Many years ago, while teaching in the USA, I tried to set up a meeting with Abrahams in Jamaica. It took weeks to locate him and even then my voice and email messages went unanswered. I eventually established a connection with his Jamaican publishers who at first seemed quite taken by the possibility of an interview and went about arranging it. All of it to no avail however. After several weeks I received

a short message that Abrahams declined the interview. My follow-up email seeking an explanation was answered with a terse response: Mr Abrahams will not be doing the interview.

Although Abrahams considered himself more Jamaican in later life and actively tried to shed his links to the country of his birth, he accepted the South African government's Order of Ikhamanga awarded in 2006 in recognition of his artistic contribution to our political liberation.

Peter Abrahams was killed in his house, on top of a hill overlooking Kingston, Jamaica on Wednesday 18 January 2017. He was 97 years old.

#### Works Cited

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