

## A.P. Brink, *A Dry White Season*

**T**he black and white communities of South Africa lived in two completely different worlds at the time of apartheid. The whites lived in a safe, unreal world far from the reality of the townships where thousands were suffering.

Though most of the white people knew that the blacks were treated unfairly, they did not help them, either because they were too afraid or mostly because they just did not care.

The novel *A Dry White Season* by the South African writer André Philippus Brink, is the story of a white man in apartheid South Africa who is awakened to the brutality and injustice of the apartheid system and of the government's efforts to suppress any dissent. The novel shows that sometimes, no matter what the cost and no matter how useless it may seem, one must take action to oppose injustice. The book also explores the personal cost of resisting repression that is accepted by one's community and maintained by a brutal government.

### André Philippus Brink

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Born in 1935, he is one of South Africa's novelists and is a Professor of English at the University of Cape Town. He wrote his first novels in Afrikaans but, when censored, began to write also in English. Interestingly, Brink writes now his works simultaneously in English and Afrikaans.

In the 1960s, he and the South African writer and painter Breyten Breytenbach were key figures in the Afrikaans literary movement known as 'Die Sestigers' ('The Sixty-ers'). This group of writers sought to use Afrikaans as a language to speak against the apartheid government, and also to bring into Afrikaans literature the influence of contemporary English and French trends. Brink's novel *Kennis van die aand* (1973) was the first Afrikaans book to be banned by the South African government.

Initially, André Brink's books were mainly concerned with the apartheid policy while his more recent work is generally regarded as postcolonial but his contribution to the modernisation of the Afrikaans language novel remains undiscussed.

### Gordon



It all really began, as far as Ben was concerned, with the death of Gordon Ngubene. But from the notes he made subsequently, and from newspaper cuttings, it is obvious that the matter went back much further. At least as far as the death of Gordon's son Jonathan at the height of the youth riots in Soweto. And even beyond that, to the day, two years earlier – represented in Ben's papers by a receipt with a brief note scribbled<sup>1</sup> on it when he'd started contributing to the schooling of the then fifteen year old Jonathan.



#### Glossary

<sup>1</sup> written quickly and untidily

Soweto



Gordon was the black cleaner in the school where Ben taught History and Geography to the senior classes. In the older journals there are occasional references to 'Gordon N.' or just 'Gordon'; and from time to time one finds, in Ben's fastidious<sup>2</sup> financial statements, entries like 'Gordon – R5.00'; or 'Received from Gordon (repayment) – R5.00', etc. Sometimes Ben gave him special instructions about notes on his blackboard; on other occasions he approached him for small personal jobs. Once, when some money disappeared from the classrooms and one or two of the teachers immediately blamed Gordon for it, it was Ben who took the cleaner under his wing and instituted inquiries which revealed a group of matric boys to be the culprits. From that day Gordon took it upon himself to wash Ben's car once a week. And when, after Linda's difficult birth, Susan was out of action for some time, it was Gordon's wife Emily who helped them out with housework.

As they came to know each other better Ben dis-

covered more about Gordon's background. As a young boy he had arrived from the Transkei with his parents when his father had found employment in the City Deep Mine. And since he showed interest in reading and writing from an early age he was sent to school – no cheap or easy undertaking for a man in his father's position. Gordon made steady progress until he'd passed Standard Two, but then his father died in a rockfall in the mine and Gordon had to leave school and start working to supplement his mother's meagre income as a domestic servant. For some time he was houseboy for a rich Jewish family in Houghton; later he found a better paid job as messenger for a firm of attorneys in the city, and then as an assistant in a bookshop. Somehow he managed to keep up his reading and the manager of the bookshop, pleased by his interest, helped him to continue his studies. In this way he eventually passed Standard Four. At that stage Gordon went back to the Transkei. A traumatic experience, as it turned out, since there was no work for him back home, apart from lending a hand with the paltry<sup>3</sup> farming activities of a great-uncle: planting maize, scouring<sup>4</sup> the veld<sup>5</sup> with a lean<sup>6</sup> dog in search of hares for meat, sitting in the sun in front of the hut. He'd left the city because he couldn't stand life there any more; but it proved to be worse on the farm. There was something fretful<sup>7</sup> and desultory<sup>8</sup> in his blood after the years he'd been away. All the money he'd brought with him had gone into 'lobola' – the dowry for a wife; and barely a year after his arrival in the Transkei he returned to the only place he really knew, Johannesburg, Gouthini. After a brief unsettled spell<sup>9</sup> he landed at Ben's school.

One after another his children were born: in Alexandra, then Moroka, then Orlando. The eldest was Jonathan, his favourite. From the outset Gordon had resolved to rear<sup>10</sup> his son in the traditions of his tribe. And when Jonathan turned fourteen he was sent back to the Transkei to be circumcised and initiated.

A year later Jonathan or Sipho, which Gordon said was his 'real' name – was back, no longer a kwedini but a man. Gordon had always spoken

### Glossary

2 meticulous – 3 unimportant – 4 searching – 5 high flat land covered in grass and with few trees – 6 thin – 7 unable to relax – 8 done without any particular purpose – 9 period – 10 to grow

about this day. From now on he and his son would be allies, two men in the house. There was no lack of friction, since Jonathan obviously had a mind of his own; but on the main issue they agreed: Jonathan would go to school for as long as possible. And it was just after he'd passed Standard Six and secondary school was becoming an expensive business, that they turned to Ben for help.

Ben made enquiries at Jonathan's school and the family's church and, finding everybody in agreement on the boy's intelligence and perseverance and promise, offered to pay for Jonathan's school fees and books for as long as he continued to do well. He was quite impressed by the youngster: a thin, shy, polite boy, always neatly dressed, his shirt as starkly white as his teeth. In exchange for the financial support, Gordon saw to it that Jonathan agreed to help out in Ben's garden over weekends.

At the end of the first year there were smiles all round when Jonathan produced his school report, showing an average of over sixty per cent. As a reward for his achievement Ben gave him an old suit that belonged to his own son Johan – the two boys were roughly the same age – as well as an almost new pair of shoes and two rand<sup>11</sup> in cash. But in the course of the second year Jonathan began to change. Although he was still doing reasonably well he seemed to have lost interest and often played, he no longer turned up over weekends for his stint<sup>12</sup> of gardening; his attitude became sullen<sup>13</sup> and truculent and a couple of times he was openly cheeky<sup>14</sup> with Ben. According to Gordon he was spending more time on the streets than at home. Surely no good could come of it. His fears were soon realised. One day there was

trouble at a beer-hall. A gang of tsotsis – hooligans – attacked a group of older men, and when the owner tried to throw them out they ran amok<sup>15</sup> in the place, smashing everything in their way. The police arrived in two vans and carted off whatever youngsters they could lay hands on in the vicinity of the beer-hall, Jonathan among them.

The boy insisted that he'd had nothing to do with the commotion, that he'd been on the scene purely by accident when the fighting broke out; but the police witnesses testified that they'd seen him with the gang. The trial was very brief. Owing to a misunderstanding Gordon didn't attend: he had been told it would take place in the afternoon but when he arrived at the courtroom it was all over. He tried to protest against Jonathan's sentence of six cuts,<sup>16</sup> but by that time the flogging<sup>17</sup> had already been administered.



### Glossary

**11** the standard unit of money in South Africa – **12** a period of time spent doing a particular job – **13** angry and silent – **14** rude – **15** behaved in a very violent way – **16** lashes – **17** punishment

### activities



### ↓ READING COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions.

- 1 Who was Gordon?
- 2 Who is Ben?
- 3 When and why did Ben start to protect Gordon?
- 4 What did Gordon's father do?
- 5 Why did Gordon have to leave school at an early age?
- 6 What did Gordon like doing in his free time?
- 7 Why did Gordon decide to leave the city at a certain point of his life?
- 8 How did Gordon rear Jonathan?
- 9 Who paid for Jonathan's education?
- 10 When did Jonathan begin to change?
- 11 Why was Jonathan arrested?