

Antjie Krog: The Altruistic Author on the Truth and Reconciliation Council

Journalists have a duty to bring out the truth in current affairs. An immense amount of responsibility lies on the shoulders of journalists around the world to look below the surface and explain to readers what is truly taking place. Unfortunately, journalists need to earn wages to live suitably just like any other person. The problem that this creates is bias in the media, because journalists will not be published if their views do not reflect the same views as the editors' of the publications that they are employed by. Antjie Krog comes from an Afrikaans community during the most ugly time of South Africa's history, apartheid. Her literature became highly regarded even though her ideas differ from the national policies of the time. Krog's honesty, compassion, and altruistic values propel her to academic and professional success. These traits drive Krog to not only write poetry, her favorite form of writing, but also motivate Krog to start her career in journalism. Antjie Krog played a huge role as one of the key journalists reporting on the TRC with SABC Radio for two years. Following the statements from the mothers of the Gugulethu 7, Krog takes further steps than all other journalists to more clearly understand testimonies made at the Truth and Reconciliation Council and ultimately aids the establishment of justice for South Africa "in its deepest sense."

Antjie Krog was a secondary school student from a farming community near the Orange Free State in 1970 when she wrote a poem for her school publication. The beautiful imagery of children of all races coming together lights up Krog's early career as a poet, but instantly separates her from a large portion of her community. Her views opposed the views of many of her peers because she did not support apartheid as well as the social issues that it brought to South Africa. Krog might have been around several racist people, but her pure spirit detached

herself from those who believed that some men are created better than others. Krog earned degrees in English, Afrikaans, and simultaneously taught at a segregated, non-White college to help train future teachers. Krog's main lesson that she gives to the world through her writing is that cultures do not communicate in the same way as others do. Communication is an important skill but the ability to understand and accept foreign concepts and cultures are even more essential for people to be able to live in peace and harmony.

When South Africa became a free, democratic country in 1994, much rebuilding needed to take place. A sense of closure was missing in the peoples' lives whose had lost loved ones in the violence that was caused by apartheid. Numerous human rights violations were committed during apartheid. Once democracy was created, South African leaders immediately worked to restore justice for all South African. The last time in history that such egregious wide spread human rights violations occurred was during the Holocaust. Nazi perpetrators were swiftly taken to the Nuremberg trials upon Nazi surrender where they faced imminent death sentences. South Africans did not want any more death however, and in fact capital punishment was discontinued as a part of the new South African Constitution. Instead of commencing a witch-hunt for perpetrators during apartheid, a committee was formed called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At the TRC, South Africans had the ability to come before the committee and ask for amnesty in front of the family and friends of the perpetrators victims. There were many conditions that the TRC set forth which outlined certain criteria in which those applying for amnesty had to meet. The most important measure of the criteria set forth was that the applicant must completely tell the entire truth regarding their actions. What is so inspiring about the TRC is that rather than seeking retributive justice, the TRC's purpose was to deliver restorative justice in hopes that South Africans could heal their emotional wounds.

During the TRC proceedings, people of very distinct, diverse backgrounds came together to uncover the human side of the atrocities that occurred during apartheid. One of the least understood contributors to speak before the TRC is Notrose Nobomvu Konile, mother of one of the Gugulethu 7 victims. Krog, along with Nosisi Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele, investigated Konile more than any other journalists. Krog used her findings to compose a book that explains Konile's method of describing the way she copes with the death of her son. Konile's son, Zabonke, was killed in a police raid in the Gugulethu Township on March 3rd, 1986 along with six of his comrades. Zabonke's body, just like the six other fallen comrades, is completely mauled by the obvious signs of police brutality. The worst part of Notrose Konile's life is identifying the body of her only son Zabonke, the sole provider for her family.

Testifying before the TRC, Konile explains, "when [she] looked at [her son], his body, [she] couldn't see his body. One of his eyes were out, there was just blood all over. He was swollen, the whole head was swollen. I could only identify his legs, because they were just thrown all over the place, one of his eyes was out. His whole head was swollen" (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 16). Konile's repetition of the gruesome details describing her son's corpse is evident of mental trauma that Mrs. Konile has to live with. On the surface it seems as though the struggle that Konile has with speaking (in her native language) is due to the immense stress that Konile is experiencing. It is important to mention that Konile received an overwhelming amount of publicity while she was in front of millions of South African viewers who tuned in every night to see the latest news regarding the TRC.

Konile's testimony makes it clear that she is the most confused mother out of the families of the deceased. Konile comes from a rural village, has never been to a town before, and by no means has access to news media. Konile says in her testimony that "I didn't even know what

Cape Town was and I didn't even know what a town looked like" (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 14). A person feels intense awe upon seeing a town for the first time. Konile saw a major metropolitan city as well as her dead son's corpse for the first time in the same day. Confusion is an understatement in describing what would go through an adult's mind, seeing a huge city and dealing with tragic loss. This confusion comes out in the rest of Konile's testimony.

Krog's book *There was This Goat* focuses on the strange details laid out by Konile for the TRC. It is no secret that South African people would find it hard to feel compassion for someone who appears slightly incoherent, stress related or not, or simply strange and unusual. Towards the beginning of Konile's testimony, she explains that she "had a very – very scary period, there was this – this was this goat looking up, this one next to me said oh! having a bad dream like that with a goat looking up is a very bad dream" (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 15). Not knowing what to make of this explanation, Krog decided to discover what the true meaning behind the statement is. The differentiating factor that makes Krog unique and treasured from her the rest of her peers is her insatiable desire to seek the real meaning behind the strange statements made by Konile. Other journalists around the nation and even from the rest of the world focused on the violent details of the horrific event. Krog searched for the humanity in Konile's testimony because other journalists assume that Konile is a rural African woman who deals with tragedy without deliberate thought. If anything, Krog makes it her imperative to present the TRC as far from a witch-hunt as possible and rather develop an environment in the new South Africa that actively promotes honesty and mutual respect.

The first journalistic reporting of the Gugulethu 7 murders took place at the scene of the crime. SABC news footage of the atrocities are thought out and planned in advance by the leaders in charge who design the raid in Gugulethu. It seems as though the journalism that is

being practiced by SABC in the mid-eighties fits the description of propaganda much more closely than it fits the description of unbiased reporting. Krog explains in her book that “after some guns and hand-grenades had been planted on the seven young people, the police had the SABC on standby to record the final scene of the incident entailing the use of a rope to pull the corpses around from a safe distance in case a hand-grenade exploded” (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 12). Krog continues to inform readers that “this footage was shown on the seven o’clock news on the day of the killings” (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 13), and one can only assume that Afrikaans viewers feel safer knowing there are seven less communist terrorists in their nationalist country.

The other three mothers who testified before the TRC recount seeing their sons on the news footage that was broadcasted without any censorship or respect. This national broadcast was a product of SABC, where Krog started her radio career covering the TRC. After South Africa became a democracy, SABC was restructured and freed of unfair censorship as well as the apartheid government’s blatant bias. SABC even broadcasts today in several languages to accommodate for South Africa’s diverse population. Konile is unique from the other testifying mothers because she has not seen the footage as her peers had that fateful day. Konile is clearly the least modern/westernized member of the group, and also it seems clear that she is the poorest as well. The TRC report neglected these important details because it is not the TRC’s place to go into the social standing of the mothers of the victims. TRC leaders repeatedly had to inform the victim’s family that they could not give them any sort of reparations even though they were clearly struggling. Krog points out that “despite the fact that some of them had already identified their sons’ bodies in the mortuary, it was the news bulletin that brought the real horror home as

to what was happening to them” (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 16). Krog’s is demonstrating her best trait as a journalist: her ability to display the human and emotional aspect of her stories.

Eunice Thembisa Miya, the mother of one of the Gugulethu 7, showed completely different communication abilities and methods than that of Konile. Philip Miller, a composer whose work was performed during South Africa’s Reconciliation Day celebration in 2006, used Miya’s testimony as inspiration. Miya, the most unforgiving of the group, probes the commission and forces them to consider the fundamental treachery in the treatment of their children. She asks “were [the white] hands better than mine, better than my sons? Were their hands so clean that they couldn’t even touch my son, why did they have to drag him?” (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 18). This is not the worst of the details though. Shot gun shells simmered in the skulls of every dead young man, completely mangling their charred faces and as Konile said, making most parts of their body unrecognizable. Only after apartheid could true journalism report the real story behind the murders of the Gugulethu 7. Reconciliation is the message of the time though, and even with Miya’s logical thought process that punishment should ensue for the perpetrators, other testimonies begged for the opposite.

Krog finds delight in reporting on a small glimpse of positive news that comes from Cynthia Ngewu, another mother of a Gugulethu 7 member. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a member of the TRC Human Rights Committee, asks Ngewu if she agrees with majority of South Africans in believing that perpetrators deserve to be dealt as severe of a punishment as life sentences. Ngewu says in front of the TRC-HRC “we do not want to see people suffer in the same way that we did suffer. We do not want to return the suffering that was imposed upon us” (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 19). Journalists do not often focus on compassion, but it is common to find Krog exposing thought provoking and inspiring news. Krog searches for the social issues

that create the hopeless setting that breeds violence. Krog highlights Ngewu's faith that she felt "all South Africans should be committed to the idea of re-accepting these people back into the community. We do not want to return the evil that perpetrators committed to the nation. We want to demonstrate humaneness towards them, so that they in turn may restore their own humanity" (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 22). Krog's own literature on the TRC's fundamental purpose resembles the moving kindheartedness that Ngewu showed to the world press. Krog charmingly wrote that "if its interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people's perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense" (Krog, *Country of my Skull*, 16). The similarity between Krog and Ngewu's attitudes are not coincidental. The TRC brought people of all backgrounds together with the same inspiring, love-thy-neighbor mantra.

Ngewu spoke to the TRC on the second day of the second week of the TRC's hearings. Journalists were unsure how to cover these incredibly sensitive stories at this point because the TRC is still at the beginning of its experimental stage. Krog and her colleagues initiated an eye-watering trend that promotes constructive and moving reporting of the TRC. These positive reports are ultimately what the readers surely want after years of fear, deception, propaganda, and hatred in the media. Krog and other journalists displayed the family members and loved ones of victims astonishingly forgiving the culprits who caused so much pain and suffering without closure for years.

In order to compare Krog to other journalists who covered the TRC, other mediums of journalism must be examined. While Krog does provide her literary interpretation of the TRC case, her writing might be viewed second best to video journalism. *Long Night's Journey into*

Day is a documentary that was nominated at the Academy Awards in 2000 for “Best Documentary.” This movie became incredibly popular because it also shares the same fascination that Krog has for the forgiving soul of Mrs. Ngewu. Thapelo Mbelo is one of two askaris who were fully involved in the counter-intelligence and the unlawful execution of the Gugulethu 7. The documentary shows Mbelo in front of the TRC where he provides a detailed description of his entire operation. Mbelo tells the TRC that he had gained the trust of the Gugulethu 7, trained them and gave them hope. Mbelo then reveals that he gave way to the ambush that ends the lives of the Gugulethu 7 one night while they are all sleeping and defenseless. Mbelo just barely earns amnesty at the TRC and begs the Ngewu family to confront him so he can plead for forgiveness in hopes that he may live the rest of his life in peace. The documentary shows Mbelo calling Mrs. Ngewu “Mamma”, and her daughters “Sister.” Ngewu speaks to members of the family one at a time.

The documentary picks up on Mrs. Ngewu who is standing directly next to Mbelo, gripping his hand against her natural instinct. Those were the same hands that ended her son’s life only a decade ago. Mrs. Ngewu tells the filmmaker that she is trying to live and think like Jesus who inspires her to grant forgiveness to her enemies. One must have a very sharp skill at holding in tears as the documentary concludes its last scene by showing Mrs. Ngewu’s teenage grandson. This young man may or may not know that “the medico-legal post mortems stated further that Mr. Christopher Piet, his father, sustained twelve bullet wounds to the head (Krog, *There was this Goat*, 24).” Never the less, this young man and Mbelo are reduced to absolute tears as they embrace, squeezing each other as if Piet was going to return from the grave if they could just find the strength to squeeze hard enough. Images like those from the documentary have an intrinsic power to move even the most hateful South Africans.

Krog's positive reporting has not been deterred and it continues today. Krog has reached the highest point in her career and continues to publish articles for esteemed magazines such as *The Guardian* in England that can be read around the world. Her last article, "*Should Power Listen to Poetry*" promotes the importance of music and writing in times of resistance but also calls for South Africans to stay awake because rebuilding South Africa has been a slow, incomplete project. Krog was most involved in writing for the sake of others at a time of heavy uncertainty and confusion. She is not afraid to keep a watchful eye on her fellow participants in the media. In her article she expresses her unhappiness with media reporting of the today. Krog begs readers to question her old employer, SABC, "which feeds us the crass consumerism of programmes where the brains of celebs, desperate to say something meaningful, rear around like newly hatched chicks in empty nests." Krog looks at her beloved South Africa, years after apartheid has ended, and wants to know how South Africans allow their media outlets to "feed a population, fatally choking on inequality, a continuous insolent stream of bling and décor by shoe-obsessed yappers." It is no surprise however that Krog, who worked in radio broadcasting for two years, has not lost her affection for a media source that is fading with time.

Today in Gugulethu stands an inspiring monument in honor of the memory of the Gugulethu 7. It was built just a short distance away from the scene where the seven young men were inhumanly murdered by South African security forces that were notorious for their swift and unchallenged "eliminations." Mandla Simon Mxinwa, Zandisile Zenith Mjobo, Zola Alfred Swelani, Themba Mlifi, Jabulani Godfrey Miya, Zabonke John Konile and Christopher Piet each have a plaque and a statue that serves as a tribute to the struggle and oppression that they eventually gave their lives for. A reporter can twist the story of the Gugulethu 7 in any way they please. Freedom of speech is a universal right that comes out rough around the edges. What no

writer should attempt to justify is the argument that the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was anything besides an overwhelming success in the case of the Gugulethu 7. This is simply not possible when perpetrators and victims embrace in sincere outbursts of emotions that have weighed so heavily on a nation with so much beauty and potential. Krog's writes these days about the consistent failings of the new government to unify its people. It is Krog's belief that the use of literature can perfectly give people of different cultures a common love to bond over and create relationships. Mrs. Ngewu and all those who found compassion from the TRC ultimately fulfill Krog's beautiful childhood poem where she begs for someone to "give me a land where black and white hand in hand, can bring peace and love to my beautiful land" (Krog, *The New Century of South African Poetry*, 260).

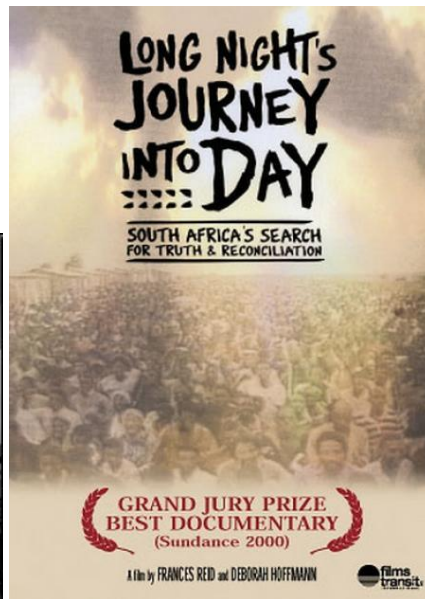
Images



Gugulethu 7 Memorial



Antjie Krog



Long Night's Journey into Day
Grand Jury Prize- Best Documentary
Sundance 2000

SOURCES

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A Long Night's Journey into Day Sundance Film Festival Poster, January 2000. Photograph courtesy of World Without Genocide, At William Mitchell College of Law

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