What makes FW tick?

In a book about power, Big Brother's biography doesn't say how the President puts the boot in when it matters. RALPH LAWRENCE discusses *The Man in His Time.*

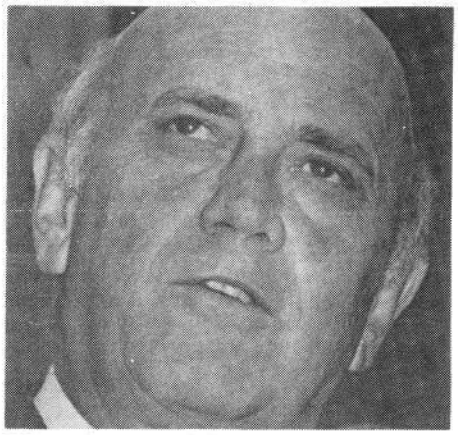
TRY this on. Any political system to retain white control in a professedly multi-racial state, however subtly contrived, and even if put forward as an intermediary step in the future, would diminish neither the attacks (from the international community) nor the pressure and uncertainty. Expediency would prove self-defeating. Thus 'the only alternative is the road of national reconstruction based on differentiation and with due regard to the interests of the different sections of the population.'

To wit, apartheid.

Is this not the Nationalist government's dilemma despite the bravura about a 'New South Africa'? Relinquishing power may well mean losing control over one's destiny. What price one's political constituency then? React and dig in as Treurnicht advocates?

He who uttered these statements would have approved. It was Prime Minister Verwoerd, opening the South African parliament in bleak 1962, as brother De Klerk reminds us.

Nearly 30 years on President FW has set course firmly along the path of expediency, notwithstanding the attendant risks. The exact destination is inherently unpredictable, so he concentrates fixedly on the journey, with one eye trained keenly on the horizon.



FW . . . the principled pragmatist. Is he a tiger in the Tuynhuis?

Willem applauds. His book is about the journey, how it transpired, what the terrain is, and who is behind the wheel. And the author himself betrays the ambiguities of the backseat driver. For peering over the statesman's shoulder we have no other than older brother. Big brother. Bleep . . . bleep.

You see, Willem was always the enlightened one. Sure he was an inveterate Nationalist; but never 'ultra conservative' like . . . In any event didn't he add 'verkrampte' to our political lexicon?

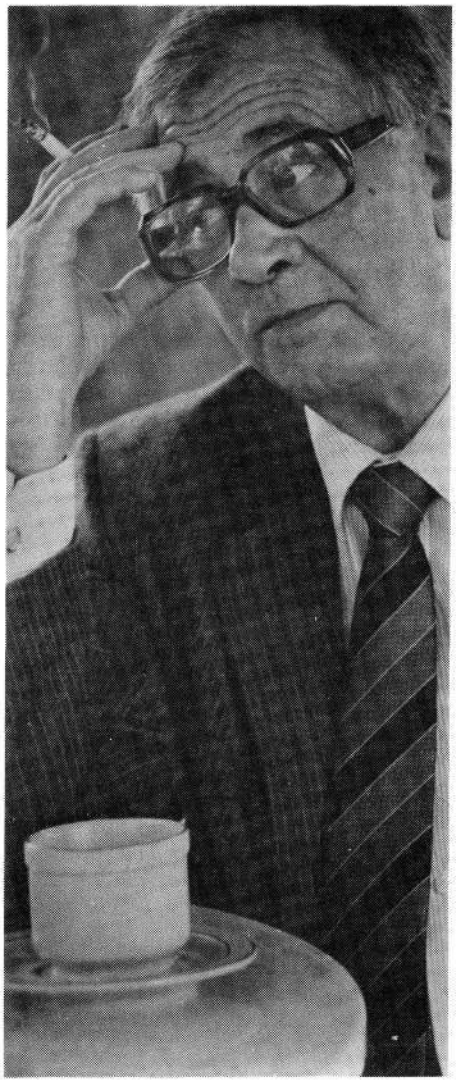
Later when light showered upon the National Party faithful, where was Willem? A step ahead of course, talking to the ANC and ministering to the birth of the Democratic Party. Now, thank goodness, the government has absorbed the DP programme. Welcome to the fold, lil' bro'. You've made it. Willem is pleased. Sixty thousand odd words testify as much.

On the one hand, elder brother (by eight years) is inordinately proud of the way in which FW's political career has blossomed. Rightly so. The president's 'political conversion', ever virtuous, has been a joy to behold.

Yet remember who's really senior! Whilst acquiescing in the obligatory homage to highest political office, Willem cannot resist chipping in his contribution as to how South Africa's endgame is proceeding. Bleep . . . bleep.

These lengthy staccato passages are trite. A political analyst's job is not merely to list every conceivable cause and jot down interminable consequences. The golden rule is to be incisive and decisive. This rather than that, here not there. Instead we get a ragbag of faddish phrases run together indiscriminately. Here commentary masquerades as analysis.

What of FW the man, the politico, the tiger in Tuynhuis? Who better qualified to offer an assessment both personally and professionally than the author in question?



Wimpie de Klerk . . . the ambiguities of being a back seat driver.

Maybe. Yet his tale is frustratingly disappointing. Family skeletons can rattle in the privacy of closed cupboards. I agree. But in such a hierarchical polity, as South Africa is, the role of the presidency is crucial. Learn about the driver and we might discover exactly how he will drive, and where to.

In Willem's estimation, FW is a chain-smoking political saint. Success, integrity and discerning judgement have infused our leader's being throughout his post-nappy existence. An apposite public relations image hoves in sight. Something for the grandchildren.

A key omission remains: political power. For power is the essential currency of political life. FW is forever the loyal party man, rooted in the culture of Afrikanerdom, we learn — a principled pragmatist.

But a thinking toady he is not, surely? Isn't he canny in the clinches? His rise from backbencher to cabinet was meteoric. And when PW Botha stumbled he was shuffled back to the Wilderness.

Just who won? Being State President is not because you doffed your cap at primary school, although that helps; it's more a case of knowing how to put the boot in when it matters. Of this Willem is unknowing, or perhaps disingenuous.

Left none the wiser, *The Man in His Time* fails to let us get a proper grasp of what makes FW tick when he has his hand on the gear-knob. Bleep . . . bleep. Vroom. ●

Dilemmas for writers

By MATTHEW KENTRIDGE, researcher in the Innes Labour Brief, and author of *An Unofficial War: Inside the Conflict in Pietermaritzburg.*

OVER the last year two collections of short stories, written in English by white South Africans have been published by David Philip publishers. The two books are very different both stylistically and thematically, and serve to illustrate the dilemmas confronting writers who seek to come to terms with the literary dimensions of contemporary South Africa.

Ivan Vladislavic's *Missing Persons* was the first to come out. The 11 short stories constitute a surreal South African landscape in which reality and expectations are constantly subverted and the author switches between the prosaic and the fantastic as the mood takes him.

→

'Satirical weapons used with macabre glee . . . and then a linear, rational approach to the tumultuous South African scene . . . '

From Page Thirteen

The first story, *The Prime Minister is Dead* begins as a straightforward recounting of an incident from the narrator's childhood: he is in the garden planting trees with his father; in the house his grandmother listens to the radio broadcast of the prime minister's funeral. The father and son abandon their gardening and run to catch a glimpse of the cortege which is passing near their house. As the procession passes them the truck towing the coffin breaks down, and at this point the expectations raised by the form of the story are thrown away.

In the general confusion which follows the breakdown, the narrator's father keeps his head. He loads the coffin on to his wheelbarrow (which he has on hand, luckily) and wheels it at gathering speed to the cemetery where, at the last moment, he checks himself on the lip of the grave and tips the coffin without ceremony into the hole, bringing the story to an abrupt, and similarly unceremonious, end.

A later story, *The Box,* is a satire on power and the media. The protagonist, Quentin, discovers one evening that he is able to pluck people out of his television screen "in a cloud of dirty electrons".

First, he grabs the prime minister whom he keeps like a hamster in a cage in the kitchen. Later, he takes the prime minister's wife and the Minister of Defence who resists and whom he swats and kills like a mosquito. Then, growing greedy, he takes a range of people from the captain of the Northern Transvaal squash team to a TV continuity announcer who particularly annoys him, priests, academics and spectators at sports events.

Quentin is set on establishing a Lilliputian republic in his spare room, with himself taking the role of God. His actions become increasingly brutal and his girlfriend, the embodiment of mercy and compassion in the story, leaves him. Quentin the deity becomes bored, and "for the hell of it" pulls a cubic metre of the Indian Ocean off the screen and takes it into the spare room, presumably to drown his victims with his own personal flood.

The Box, fantastic as it is, is at least written as a linear narrative; other stories in *Missing Persons* reject even that concession to realism.

*Flashback Hotel *TYYY* is a prose poem about a shadowy character moving about the halls of a recently bombed hotel. He has no single identity but is instead either a collage of different people or no-one at all, the Missing Person of the book's title. Vladislavic abandons linear conventions giving the story a dream-like vagueness. Images slide into each other in arbitrary clusters; black humour is dominant: after the bomb blast the narrator returns to the hotel to find a water filled crater in the foyer in which dead waiters are floating. Patrons cross the lobby using the corpses as stepping stones.

In Vladislavic's work, South Africa is portrayed as a country of such turmoil and contradiction that the familiar realist methods of literary representation are rendered obsolete. This is not particularly surprising, given the context in which the stories were written. The State of Emergency was in place, the government was at the height of its repressive powers and the cynicism and hypocrisy of official statements and actions seemed set to surpass even the most savage and extreme satire.

Under these conditions literature becomes a part of the struggle, employed to ridicule and expose the ludicrous tyranny of the regime. Vladislavic's stories are political texts, written with this object. He uses his own satirical weapons to undermine the symbols of the ruling party — the prime minister, the Voortrekker Monument, sombre reports of bombs in crowded urban areas — and manipulates them with a macabre glee.

Ivan Vladislavic, Missing Persons (David Philip); and David Medalie, The Killing of the Christmas Cow (David Philip).

But powerful as this strain of writing may be, it is not all pervasive: for into this environment of the armed-and-ready-to-fire short story comes David Medalie with his first collection, *The Killing of the Christmas Cows.*

Medalie's stories could not be more different from those of Vladislavic. He is strictly faithful to the linear, rational form of narrative. His stories have a beginning, middle and end and concern real people in recognisable situations. He does not attempt to write the whole of South Africa into his book but is content with small stories of narrow ambit but wide illumination.

His themes are reminiscent of those favoured by Nadine Gordimer in her early collections of short stories. The events covered frequently take place in small towns on the highveld outside Johannesburg, and many of the stories are introspective, shot through with autobiographical fragments and images, gleaned in childhood, which finally emerge through the medium of fiction. Like Gordimer, Medalie writes stories of childhood innocence betrayed by adult worldliness, but which also contain the oblique wisdom of a child's view and interpretation of the adult world.

Both Gordimer and Medalie have a particular talent for description, for filling in the gaps in the full tapestry of the story. They convey the dustiness and claustrophobia of small town interiors; the low ceilings of darkened rooms; the waning heat of a Transvaal late summer twilight.

One story in Medalie's book, in particular, entitled *The Bougainvillea Tryst* recalls one of Gordimer's earliest tales, *Ah, Woe is Me,* published in 1952 in her first collection of short stories, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent.* Both stories deal with the Servant-Madam dichotomy, the power relations which dictate their interaction, and with the failure of both parties to communicate with each other across the divide.

In Gordimer's story the maid, Sarah, becomes too ill to continue working and disappears into the void of the townships. She reappears in the form of her daughter who comes to tell the Madam that Sarah is dying and that the family is destitute. The Madam, the Narrator, is helpless in the face of this disaster: 'What could I do for her? What could I do?' she asks rhetorically. 'Here . . ., I said. Here — take this, and gave her my handkerchief.'

In *The Bougainvillea Tryst,* Medalie's Madam is revisited by an old black man, the gardener who worked for her some years before. He, too, brings a tale of woe, of a son killed by tsotsis, of sickness and unemployment. The Madam, incidentally a liberal dismayed by the rise of support for the Conservative Party invites him in for tea in the kitchen. They sit together stiffly, going through the farcical motions of a normal social visit, until the purpose of the old man's return is revealed. He asks for money which she gives him with relief, and with equal relief watches him leave.

The Madam and the gardener, we understand, have spent almost 30 years of their lives in close daily contact — she, in a relationship of benign patronage towards him — but they are nonetheless unable to sustain half an hour of conversation over a pot of tea.

The best story in *The Killing of the Christmas Cows* is called *In Search of Elegy.*

Eric Fraser, a city-wise litterateur travels to a small, and in his opinion insignificant, town in his attempt to trace the life of Deidre Hattingh, a famous dead writer who lived in the dorp for a number of years, and whose biography he is writing.

Fraser is unenthusiastic about the journey and about the town. He cannot imagine living there for a week let alone the 12 years of Hattingh's sojourn, and in a rare moment of self-knowledge he admits to himself that if he cannot gain some understanding of her commitment to staying, his biography will miss its mark.

Later he meets the Vermaaks, Hattingh's former neighbours. The sickly Mr Vermaak slopes off to bed in a mumble jumble of racist comments, but his wife is hospitable and

→