

HONORARY DOCTOR

DOCTOR LITTERARUM (Honoris Causa)

VAN HEERDEN, Etienne Roche

In recent decades, the University of the Free State has not only taken the lead in recognising distinguished writers of the Sixties, but also a later generation writers and critics. These include Jakes Gerwel, J.C. (Jaap) Steyn, Antjie Krog and Karel Schoeman.

However, the Afrikaans writer who enjoys the highest international reputation, whose work has been translated into many of the major world languages and who is in fact the most acclaimed Afrikaans writer of his generation, is Etienne van Heerden, currently Hofmeyr Professor and Head of the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch Studies at the University of Cape Town.

Etienne Roche van Heerden was born on 3 December 1954, and grew up on the farms Doornbosch, located at Toorberg in the district of Graaff-Reinet, and Gerriehoek, situated at the foot of Buffalo Head, where Olive Schreiner was buried. In his later works Van Heerden would continually return to the space of his youth, as in his acclaimed novel, *Toorberg* (1986). The Schreiner figure also makes a regular appearance in his work.

His father died at a young age and Van Heerden and his family moved to Stellenbosch, where he matriculated at Paul Roos Gymnasium. Here he became acquainted with André le Roux du Toit, later André Letoit and Koos Kombuis. After school he went to the South African Navy, where he served at the Equestrian & Dog School on account of blindness in his right eye.

He obtained the degrees BA (Law), LLB and later an Honours and a Master's degree in Afrikaans and Dutch (cum laude). Initially he practised as a lawyer and later worked at an advertising company. The experience gained in this way he used and processed in, amongst others, his novel, *Toorberg*, which deals with the investigation of a judge into the death of a child, as well as in his satirical novel, *Casspirs en Campari's* (1991).

After a stint as a Lecturer in Afrikaans at the then University of Zululand, André P. Brink appointed Van Heerden as Lecturer in Afrikaans and Dutch at the University of Rhodes in Grahamstown in 1987, where he was responsible for literary theory and the course in creative writing. In 1999 he was appointed at the University of Cape Town, initially as Associate Professor.

In 1978 Van Heerden's first story published in book form, *My Kubaan*, appeared, as well as a youth novel, *Matoli*, for which he was awarded the Perskor Prize for Youth Literature. One already becomes aware in his early works of a particular language sensitivity and stylistic ability, coupled with an interest in the South African actuality. Although Van Heerden is currently almost exclusively known as a prose writer, his published poetry collections and cabaret texts give evidence of his remarkable versatility.

His first short story collection, *My Kubaan* (1983), was awarded the Eugene Marais Prize. The theme of the title story, namely the Angolan War, was continued in *Om te Awol* (1984), with which Van Heerden proved himself to be more than just a young and promising writer. It is, however, with the magical-realistic novel *Toorberg* (1986) that Van Heerden gained recognition far beyond the borders of South Africa. This work earned him almost all the major literary prizes in South Africa: the W.A. Hofmeyr Prize, the ATKV Prize, the CNA Prize and the Hertzog Prize.

Toorberg is a modern Afrikaans novel in which many of the features of traditional Afrikaans farm novel are parodied. No heir to the family farm exists anymore; white patriarchs become irrelevant and the fate of people across the colour divide becomes tangled. Furthermore, this remarkable novel shows that the truth (of the past) is untraceable; never to be found in full. Death seems to be final and everyone (especially the investigating officer!) must accept responsibility for the death of Druppeltjie du Pisani. Furthermore, in a metaphorical way it is suggested that the now obsolete white powers were guilty of abuse of power.

Suppression of information, military service, violence and hedonism play an important role in Van Heerden's novel, *Casspirs en Campari's* (1991), which creates a disturbing, realistic image of the violent late eighties of the last century. Already in this work, there are many autobiographical elements, a trend that continued later, especially in *In stede van die liefde* (2005), having a stifling effect. In this novel, written after Van Heerden's coronary bypass, the heart metaphor plays a central role. Van Heerden is very adept at capturing the *Zeitgeist* in several of his novels, for instance, and in *Casspirs en Campari's*, the fragmented society of the period of the Angolan Wars truly comes alive.

Die stoetmeester (1993) focuses on the Eastern Cape English, descendants of British settlers and in many respects uninvolved in political realities. Apart from a very ingenious application of the first-person perspective (because the story is told by a deceased), this novel by Van Heerden is a serious attempt at striving for reconciliation between black and white. Again, debt, as well as how the past should be dealt with is a central theme, a theme that from there on will turn up in his work like a refrain.

Kikoejoe (1996) has a strong autobiographic undertone, with a carnivalesque measure of eccentric characters, which in many instances point forward to the later *Dertig nagte in Amsterdam* (2008). The family intrigues take place against the backdrop of a Raka-like "Thing".

Critics are of the opinion that *Die swye van Mario Salviati* (2000) is one of the highlights in Van Heerden's oeuvre. In essence, this novel is a clever play on the Afrikaans town novel, in which an unknown person (in this case, a woman) visits a town with a specific purpose, but in the process manages to unravel secrets hidden by the townsfolk, symptomatic of the South African history. Once again, the divides between races become vague, forgotten facts surface and part of history is rediscovered.

Asbesmiddag (2007) is a notorious text because the figure of the magnate in the book is very similar to Anton Rupert. Van Heerden vehemently had to deny these similarities in public. Nevertheless, it is a very introspective book, in places appearing like a manual for a writing school because of the many ways in which the confines of the novel are almost deliberately stretched and tested.

However, it is with *Dertig nagte in Amsterdam* (2008) that Van Heerden probably wrote his most gripping novel. It addresses especially a particular version of history or the genealogy. The main character, Henk de Melker, so to speak "milks" the dry teat of historical representation, because he writes down those biographies which no-one considers of much worth, those forgotten "little" histories of petty people. Of course, on the one hand, it is the safe option, because you can sit in your little forgotten corner and write peacefully without getting in competition with other historians; on the other hand it is a form of restitution, because it draws people from their oblivion. The story of this novel is also a form of affirmative action, because it reflects the story of De Melker, in itself the personification of a man of nothing.

In an unexpected way, De Melker is forced by the conditions of a bequest not only to re-live, explore and understand the history of his eccentric aunt, but also his own. **History is not the rendering of facts, he realizes over time, not the disinterested and almost blameless recording of the lives of people. You will be prompted to determine causes, determine consequences and evaluating choices within the political and social context that you describe. The past does not only push itself into the present, it even determines it.** Through

the writing of history you develop a preference for, even an adopting of certain behaviours and gradually question yourself about your own place in history, in short, your own identity. In the rendition of the eccentric Aunt Zan, who speaks in tongues when she has a *grand mal* attack, Van Heerden creates a memorable character in which he can let his baroque style come into its own.

From Van Heerden's biography it is clear that he has an impressive number of awards to his credit, including almost all the major South African literary awards, and that he enjoys wide international recognition. His novels have been translated into eleven languages and his contributions are included in anthologies worldwide. He is the mentor and supervisor of various authors (English and Afrikaans) who have all published successfully and in many cases also received awards. One of his most important contributions to the South African society is his creation of LitNet and the development of this powerful digital website which now also includes two accredited journals. For this in itself he already deserves the highest recognition.

It is an honour of the University of the Free State to recognise a person who has changed the South African landscape positively by conferring the degree **DLitt (Honoris Causa)** upon **Dr VAN HEERDEN, Etienne Roche**.

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