

inside Antjie's head

Anthea Garman interviews Antjie Krog about her new book

Country of My Skull is NOT a book about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It's not a piece of journalism, or even a collection of pieces of journalism. It's not the long, written equivalent of the work Antjie Krog has done for SABC radio on the commission over the past two years.

And what should alert the reader to all this is the name she uses. Krog, not Samuel. This is Antjie the writer, not Antjie the journalist.

The TRC has been for Krog an emotionally wrenching experience in which she has struggled with "things that affect me, being white, being Afrikaner, being a woman".

While filing reports she has wanted to get behind the process, get into the "lots of layers", beyond the "privileged space where this doesn't happen here, but it is happening somewhere else".

"The process of the commission is so relentless. There is no time for debates on the deeper issues and the psychological issues."

She says when the commission first started up a psychiatrist suggested that a team be tasked with writing material to be disseminated through the news media to help people understand what was going on during the process of the hearings. It was a suggestion that never came to be.

But it's one that Krog has never let go. She is very conscious of how people out there are trying to make sense of what she has been sitting through daily.

When she wrote the piece for the

Mail&Guardian (the one which won her the Foreign Correspondents' Award) she was amazed at the reaction. Because of the very public honesty with which she wrote of her struggles and inabilities, people identified with her. Saying "I" (usually avoided in journalism) "opened up the TRC and took people into it". She found a huge public identification with her own self.

This "I" has become the narrator for the book. But don't confuse the "I" with Antjie. They are not always the same person. And the "I" also becomes the individual giving testimony at the commission of each personal experience transcribed here from actual recordings. This is the thread that runs through the book and which Krog is hoping will engage readers and keep them reading even when the words become gruesome and gruelling.

Krog has said publicly many times that she is more comfortable with lies than the truth. The lie can be sniffed out and identified, the truth is more difficult to pin down. This is not an "accurate" book, she says. There is a difference between accuracy (the stuff of journalism with its questions and details) and truth (the thing we approximate best by using myths to help us grasp what it is).

"I couldn't capture this process with journalism," she says. "There is no space in journalism for what is opinionated, vague and single-sourced."

So she set the story free by putting it into another "space frame", a book in which she "fabricates a truth, to deal with it and live with it".

There are people here who don't exist, or who are composite characters. There are events that never took place, there are situations out of sequence.

Why? Because that's the way the mind works.

Disparate things hover in the recesses of the brain and then suddenly they come together, gel and make sense, often provoked by something else. This is what Krog is doing, filtering through her own mind - her skull - all sorts of things that she wants to make sense of - "not to hammer but to open it up", she says.

She wants to get at "the amazing otherness of where they (the witnesses) have been and how they've dealt with it". She knows from sitting through testimony that not all of it has been "true". There are motives, there are reasons for lying to the commission. But journalism has no

place to deal with that. She can deal with this in the book.

I ask her specifically about the fabrications and the scene where the narrator's husband demands to know the details of an affair. I point out that when you're in a situation of trauma it is the details, the facts, the journalist's who-what-why-when-where-how questions that suddenly become so important to make sense of what's happening to you.

She laughs. But she doesn't share the same loyalty to the facts. Truth is much more than details. Truth has multiple faces.

And, she points out, when people have those details and facts, they want more. "Then they want to know: 'Do you feel sorry now?'"

One of the strongest criticisms of the book has been against the chapter which deals specifically with the testimony of women. Both Stephen Laufer in *Business Day* and Van Zyl Slabbert in *Insig*, have implied that she reinforces through her writing the stereotype of innocent, caring, suffering women.

"This is an interesting resistance," she says. "I think it's an inability to acknowledge that men are fucking responsible for all of this."

"The older I get the more I use the word 'female' for the capacity to see different sides and all sides, even the unimportant; and the word 'male' for seeing only one point of view and running with it."

Krog is fascinated with what has happened in some of the testimony given by women. How things have become spoken and public. At a hearing in Worcester, a woman was asked exactly where she was shot. She said the word "vagina" aloud to a packed hall which gasped. Something has shifted for us all when language is used in open space for the first time, according to Krog.

Country of My Skull, I feel, is Krog, insistently insinuating into public space, a different language for dealing with one of the most traumatic public processes we as a nation will go through.

Country of My Skull is published by Random House.



Antjie Krog has published eight volumes of poetry. Reporting as Antjie Samuel, the author and her SABC team won the Pringle Award for excellence in journalism for their reporting on the TRC. Krog also won the Foreign Correspondents' Award for her Mail&Guardian articles on the TRC.

