

Identity and rediscovery –
Andries Visagie interviews
Marita van der Vyver and
Ingrid Winterbach

Andries Visagie: Good evening ladies and gentlemen.¹ Both Ingrid Winterbach and Marita van der Vyver have recently been described as two of the most important writers writing in Afrikaans today.² Both Marita and Ingrid started to write in the 1980s and between the two of them they have won just about every Afrikaans literary prize.

Marita van der Vyver is a writer of novels and short stories for adults and children and over the last few years, quite prolifically, she has published at least one book a year. Marita writes about the lives of women, about family life and she relentlessly examines the intricacies of interpersonal relationships and single-handedly she probably did more for the sexual liberation of women than any other Afrikaans writer before her and after her. Even though Marita often writes about serious topics like death and loss, her work is nevertheless filled with a lot of happiness and joy. Her polished and accessible prose is indeed invigorating and inspiring.

Ingrid Winterbach is a Durbanite, and a well-loved one I might add. As a visual artist she regularly exhibits her drawings in the Durban art galleries and also elsewhere in South Africa but tonight she is here in her capacity as a novelist. Ingrid often writes about individuals in pursuit of some intellectual project in a time of political turmoil. This could be the South African War which was fought a hundred years ago or it could be more recent, like the anti-apartheid struggle. Ingrid usually writes a very soft unhurried narrative and the writer Antjie Krog recently remarked that Ingrid is probably one of the most unique and talented stylists writing in Afrikaans today.³ I would like to ask Marita and Ingrid to do a reading from their work and then after that we will have a discussion.⁴

Andries Visagie: Thank you very much Marita and Ingrid for those wonderful readings. Marita, could I direct the first question to you? Your real breakthrough, your big breakthrough as a writer, came in 1992 with the publication of your first novel for adults, *Griet skryf 'n sprokie*, in Afrikaans. The title of the English translation is *Entertaining Angels*. In 1992 South Africans were slowly clawing their way

towards democracy, and at the same time the puritanical sexual legislation of the apartheid government was still firmly in place. And then suddenly you came along with a novel which had quite a frank and open sexual content. It was seen as a daring novel for women at the time, and yet it sold like hot cakes. The novel was a huge success. It was obviously a good book but could you maybe give us an explanation why so many readers found it interesting to buy and read your book.

Marita van der Vyver: I think it was the rare thing that we writers would all like to aim for: the right book at the right time; it is just something that happens. I think I am surely not the first Afrikaans writer who touched on the subject of sex. I might have done it a little more explicitly but I think the breakthrough might have been the fact that I poked fun at male sex, at masculine sex. And I think not only were people at first shocked, thinking: "Okay, here's a good *boeremeisie* not only writing about sex but actually laughing at male sex organs". And that made them curious. It was a fun book too. There was a lot of humour and I think that combination is all that I can possibly think of why it was so successful.

Andries Visagie: Now since that time you have published many other novels, but did you not find it a bit inhibiting that that book, which was such a huge success, raised expectations of a second *Entertaining Angels* and a third one? In fact, you did write a sequel a couple of years later, *Travelling light*. In Afrikaans the title was *Griet kom weer*. But did you not feel a bit inhibited in your own creativity by these expectations?

Marita van der Vyver: Totally! I think I felt for the first few years after *Griet skryf 'n sprokie* like a mother who wanted to disown a very naughty child. This book made me feel protective towards my other books. It was like having this one precocious child who takes up all the attention. There was just so much hype around this one book and I was seen as an overnight success, although I had been writing youth fiction for ten years at that stage but people do not really take youth fiction seriously. So it is as if I had dropped from heaven one day with this book whereas I had actually been writing and paying my dues as a writer and learning the hard way by publishing for ten years. So it was hard for me. I was glad of course. Any writer is glad if a book does well and it had that wonderful combination of doing well, it won a lot of prizes, plus it sold very well. No writer can ask for more. I did not want to go back to that so I wanted to write something completely different. The next book was a kind of a children's book for adults or an adult's book for children, *Childish Things*, a coming of age story because I wanted to break through that barrier of: "This is young adult fiction and this is adult fiction". I do not think there should be such a barrier between them. And then,

actually, it was ten years later that I went back to Griet after I had left the country and was living in France. I wrote another book *Breathing Space* and Griet popped up as a cameo character. These things happened and I realised that Griet and another character from a previous novel had reappeared in a group scene. And I started wondering about her and I realised that I am actually quite curious about what happened to this person's life but I did not think I would have been able to go back to that. So it was exactly ten years later, and I covered the exact same period: the first novel was set between 1989 and 1990, which was a wonderful period all over the world, a moment of hope not only in South Africa but in Europe with the fall of the Berlin wall; the opening up of Eastern Europe. And so, ten years later, it was November 1999 to February 2000, the new millennium that was also a kind of a hopeful period. I think that if I ever had to return to Griet again she would be much more despondent about the state of the world.

Andries Visagie: Ingrid your most recent novel, *Niggie* (English translation: *To Hell with Cronjé*), was published in 2002 and received the very prestigious Hertzog Prize, which is quite a big achievement. In this novel you write about a group of soldiers during the Anglo Boer War. But this is actually not the first time that you have been drawn to the South African War. In your visual work there are often references to the South African War and in one of your earlier novels, *Belemmering (Impediment)*, there are also references to the South African War. What is it about this war that fascinates you so much that you have to return to it again and again?

Ingrid Winterbach: I think that every time that I am asked this question I probably answer it in a different way. I think *now* my answer is that it is probably the beginning of my personal history. My grandparents on my father's side experienced the War first hand. My father was born after the War, so I am actually only two generations removed from the War. Also, I think I should actually have had a huge photograph of those people here tonight. My grandfather is wearing a beaver cap, he looks like a Russian peasant and when I look at those people it seems as if there is nothing that connects us. And yet they are my grandparents. But anyway, I think also that the South African War is my father's world. It is a world that I, from a very early age, connected to my father. It is very much a male world of my father. It is a world that I have perceived from a distance. It is a world of which my father told me stories. It is a world compared to my mother's world which is a close-up world with women. It was a family dominated by females against this world that I have always seen from a distance, a male world, a world of stories and war. And I think that is what probably fascinates me, going back to that.

Andries Visagie: At the time when *Niggie* was published many critics remarked that *Niggie* is a far more accessible novel than your previous novels. But obviously it did not go along with a lowering of artistic merit; it did get the Hertzog Prize after all. Did you make a conscious decision to write a more accessible novel with *Niggie*?

Ingrid Winterbach: I never agreed with anybody that my novels were not accessible. But the one previous to *Niggie*, *Buller se plan (Buller's Plan)* (it was also framed by the South African War), did so poorly. It was so not well received that I must have decided that I cannot go further on this route. I will have to change if I want to sell any books.

Andries Visagie: And was it a permanent change? I hope not.

Ingrid Winterbach: Yes, I have since been converted, but...

Andries Visagie: Marita, the theme of our discussion tonight is identity and re-discovery. Your book *Short Circuits* from which you just did a reading was published last year. It is a collection of short stories about women who are travelling and whose travels very often become a journey of rediscovery of an identity and you have also written about travel in *Travelling Light*. What is it about travelling that you find so attractive as material for your books?

Marita van der Vyver: I think it opens up, for me anyway, all my senses when I move out of my comfort zone. I am sometimes so dulled by children, people and daily life, the everyday horror of keeping a house clean that I *need* to get away. I find that the moment I get on an airplane or train my imagination opens up, my eyes open up, my ears open up, I taste better. All my senses just come alive; the food tastes different. So I think that more than anything else, and on a very practical level, sometimes if I travel without my children my imagination has the time to open up and I find that I just burst with ideas.

Andries Visagie: For some years now you have been living in the south of France with your family in Provence and your most recent book that was launched a few days ago, *Where the Heart Is*, is a very engaging account of your life in Provence and I think it is also your first overtly autobiographical book. What did you hope to achieve with this book? It was a very joyful and colourful book to read but what was your goal with this book?

Marita van der Vyver: Very specifically to debunk the myth of my fairy tale life in France. Because especially my Afrikaans speaking readers have this image, maybe I was looking for it, because the title of my first novel was *Griet skryf 'n sprokie* which literally translated means "Griet writes a fairy tale". And you know what journalists are like (I was one myself)! In every article or interview that is there of me in newspapers and magazines the past fifteen years the word "fairy tale" (*sprokie*), always comes in, especially since I have met a Frenchman and live in Provence. So it is always this: "Marita's life has turned into a fairy tale!"; "Marita is living out the fairy tale!" And so, basically, I wanted to write about the not so nice side of living, what you do not see on the postcard. I think I have all the same problems that you have anywhere else and you have very specific problems and also I think I wanted to say to South Africans that we are sometimes inclined to be a little bit inferior about South Africa. We think there are certain things we complain about here because it is Africa. And when you live in Europe in a first world country like France and you have to do with bureaucracy that drives you around the bend with inefficiency and strikes – the French are famous for strikes – and things that I think people complain about in South Africa too, I think: "What are you complaining about?" So I just wanted to say that no matter where you live, there is the good side and the bad side.

Andries Visagie: Ingrid, your other major success apart from *Niggie* was *The Elusive Moth* and you have read a beautiful passage from this novel which was published for the first time in 1993 in Afrikaans. It is a novel about Karolina Ferreira who goes to the Free State to do her research. She goes to the bar and she dances a lot. But apart from that the narrative is very soft and very slow. And I do not think you are really a writer who writes aggressive plots, the stories are more lingering, it is slow moving and, of course, it gives you the opportunity to let your beautiful style come to the fore. But do you sometimes feel that there is a lot of pressure on you to write hard hitting plots, with fast moving story lines, or is this not really the case?

Ingrid Winterbach: When you talk about my beautiful style, it sounds as if it is all about bows and frills! Yes, I said just now that I have been recently converted to plots. I think that I am a late developer. I have now ended actually where other people begin. Where other people are discovering the joy of everything else, I am discovering the joys of a plot. Plots, I see now – and it is true that the first novels are rather plotless – gives one enormous freedom. It gives you freedom to meander, to swing from the chandeliers, to do fancy footwork. Previously I did not know that. But, seriously, plot gives you a great deal of freedom to do more. I have written a novel which I have put on ice, and I am going back, I am really looking

forward to doing this, to “plotify” that novel! And the other thing about a plot is that you can hide behind a plot; that if people say: “What are you writing about?” you as a writer can say it is about this or that. Because previously when people asked me: “What do you write about?” I was totally vulnerable. I do not know what I write about. So I am looking forward to a sealed plot as a shield. It protects one. I was astounded when Chris Abani said that all his work, all his novels, whatever he writes, is only about becoming. I thought that is something to be able to say about one’s own work. But okay, that is something else.

Andries Visagie: But will you not run the danger that your books might become like all the other “emplotted” novels in the world? I think there is a space for novels like yours.

Ingrid Winterbach: Well, I can always go back to my old ways.

Andries Visagie: Marita, do you find the pressure from publishers and from readers to emplot and write aggressive fast moving plots?

Marita van der Vyver: I don’t think I am too hot on plots, either. I think maybe, I do not know, it is a woman’s thing, but relationships between people are what drive my novels. That everything is in what happens to the people, not the action, certainly not. The action is in the relationship, so no. I do find nowadays that because I write, I think, fairly accessible novels (I try to be accessible), I do find that publishers would say this could be a little bit shortened towards the end and that kind of thing. They do try and pressurise you a little bit to cut it basically, to make it tighter and of course it is good, a novel must be tight but sometimes you have to know when it really needs to be tighter and when it is just because they want you to move on faster to make it easier.

Andries Visagie: Marita, over the last few years, for some reason, many Afrikaans writers have started to explore the lives of and identities of elderly women. I am thinking here of that wonderful novel by Marlene van Niekerk, *Agaat*, there is also *This Life* by Karel Schoeman and also in *Short Circuits* and in *Vergenoeg* (“Far enough”), which was published in 2003, you do the same. Why do you feel that you need to explore the experiences of elderly women on their deathbeds in your books?

Marita van der Vyver: Well, I write mostly about women. I have to correct you – *Short Circuits* is not just stories about women, there are at least two stories with male protagonists. But yes, I do write mostly about women and I write for and about women and girls of all ages because as you have said, I write children’s

novels, short stories, for adolescents and for adult women *and* men, hopefully, so I often draw on my own experience. But when I write about an elderly woman, especially someone who is facing death, there is no experience to rely on because I am not there yet. And then I have to use imagination. I mean, I always have to use imagination anyway no matter what I write, but I like the challenge of not having experience to draw on when I write about being really old and ill and dying and, I mean, all writers are writing about death anyway or the fear of death.

Andries Visagie: Thank you very much. Time is flying and I would really like to give the audience an opportunity to ask a question or two.

Audience member A: I would like to direct a question to Ingrid, a very simple question: You practice two arts; how do you find the time for all this? I practice one and I do not have enough time for that.

Ingrid Winterbach: Yes, it is very difficult. I am quite envious of other writers who have only their writing that they have to focus on, because I have to divide my time between two forms of art.

Audience member A: You obviously do the two successfully. You only have 24 hours a day...

Ingrid Winterbach: Yes, but I always think how successful I could be if I only did one! But they are very different activities and it is actually good for me.

Audience member B (Ishtiyaq Shukri): Hi Ingrid. I am drawn to the South African War and what struck me again, as you were talking about it, was just how recent that war was but how far away it seems. It also changed the way in which – it was the first modern war – we conducted war in the twentieth century. My question is about your grandfather's picture. Is it part of your idea to remind us of that war now, to bring the war forward in time?

Ingrid Winterbach: Yes, I think so. I bring to that war obviously a modern sensibility. Although I wanted to keep it historical, in a sense, I could not but bring to it a different kind of sensibility. It is also that I want to get closer to it, personally, as if I want to gather my grandparents and bring them towards me on a personal level. But for my readers yes, because it's an important point maybe not only in my personal history but in the history of the country and different people will have different beacons almost. My children will have other important beacons but for me it has been an important event and it has changed.

Audience member C (Bernardine Evaristo): Yesterday when Kagiso Lesego Molo-pe was on stage, she was asked why she does not like male characters, which is really about the burden of so-called representation. As she is one of the few black women being published in South Africa people feel that she should be writing about everything because there are not many black women writing. So as two white South African women do you feel the burden of so-called representation? Are there things that you feel you should write about, are there taboos that are not being written about? Do you feel pressured or do you ever get pressure to write about certain things or *not* write about certain things?

Marita van der Vyver: Well, fortunately by the time that I started to publish there were other Afrikaans women writing, so I did not feel Kagiso's kind of pressure. But because, as you heard, I may have opened up something new – writing more explicitly about sexual things bringing in humour and so on – yes, there is a pressure to write the same kind of book again. I think all writers feel in a way that if they had one book which was successful on a certain topic, writing about a certain type of character, then readers want to read the same book and that is the kind of pressure I felt. But apart from that, I write what I know about and my characters have tended to be mostly Afrikaans speaking white women. In the book that I have just finished (that is not published yet),⁵ for the first time most of the characters are probably not white but black characters from different countries from Africa living in Europe. But that was not because I felt challenged or anything. I have always felt that I am not going to insert a black character just because it is politically correct, because I need to. If it is not true for what I am writing about, I would not do it. For this story that I have been writing I needed that, I needed to write about a group of characters coming from different countries in Africa connecting in Europe.

Ingrid Winterbach: I do not think I have ever felt pressured to write about anything, not from outside, maybe from inside I felt that I would like to embrace and to have as much as possible of the South African reality, but that is very difficult. I also realise how limited one actually is by one's own perspective and your own experience. But I am interested in other experiences, but no pressure at least, not from outside, no.

Audience member D: This question is for Marita. In writing work which is autobiographical, that touches so deeply on your life and presumably the lives of your family and people close to you, how do you negotiate the boundary of privacy or appropriate disclosure, and how does that work for your family?

Marita van der Vyver: It is very, very hard, I think for all writers. No, I can't speak for all writers – I speak for myself. I am very afraid of hurting the people close to me, the story I just read from, "Circular Flight", is probably the most closely autobiographical fictionalised writing I have ever done. It was written in two voices, the "I" part and the woman part. It was a way of dealing with something I needed to write about years after it happened. It took me fifteen years to write that story. The book Andries [Visagie] was referring to, *Where the Heart is*, is non-fiction. Where I deal openly with my family, I adopt a completely different style. It is humorous, it is fun, and mostly light essays. I poke fun at my family but much more at myself. I am very careful not only about my family but also about the people in the village where I live for instance. If you write a book, it is like travel writing except that I am not a traveller; I am there in that village. If you travel through a village you can write an acute account of and poke horrible fun at the people around you. But if you actually live in that village, your children go to school in that village. It can get back to them! So although it is a non-fictional account, it is exaggerated sometimes. I have actually created one or two generic characters, generic French village characters, because I knew if I had to write about the people in my village, using their real names, it might actually get uncomfortable. There was a writer recently in France who wrote a story, a fictionalised story about a village. He was rather nasty to the people in the village, and he literally had to move. If it is a small village, they can make it so uncomfortable for you.

Audience member E (Cedric Sissing): A question to both Ingrid and Marita. Ingrid, in *The Elusive Moth* you emphasized the style, as Andries mentioned, of a soft and slow narrative, especially in the way the characters are described and what they are doing, but at the same time you leave such a lot of tension at the end of each chapter. I am interested in the craft of the style of the writing and how the writer paces the novel. Do you sometimes go to the end and the middle and the beginning and consciously think: "Well, where am I going to place this and that?" just to keep the tension going? Particularly in *The Elusive Moth*, there is tremendous tension. Those characters have so much depth and mystery and you really want to know what is going to happen nearer to the end. Marita, you are quite a talented writer in that you are writing for three age groups. *Mia's Mom* is for the very young; I think you have some books for older children as well; and of course your adult novels. Which of those came first? Were they simultaneous or did the children's books come later?

Marita van der Vyver: No, I started out writing so-called young adult fiction because I was very young when I published my first book. At the age of twenty

one, thirty seemed old to me. So I thought that I did not really have something to say to adults out there, but I could very, very clearly remember what it was like to be sixteen or fourteen. Sometimes adult writers lose that if they get too wrapped up in their adult lives – the intensity of emotion of young people, of teenagers, of adolescents; how incredibly tense everything feels. So it basically happened like that. I wanted to write a kind of coming of age book. The young characters were a way to learn. And then when I wrote the first adult novel I was suddenly seen as an overnight success. I then wrote another novel which fell in both categories. And since then, I have been moving back and forth. For a while I wrote a few adult novels but I always knew that I was going to write a young adolescent novel again. The novels for the very young children actually came only after I had children myself. But it is not easier to write for children! There is still this ladder of literary worth, where it is seen as the younger the ages that you write for the easier it is. Writing a good book for very young children of five or six is like writing a poem; it is not easy. You have to ruthlessly cut out your words, which is very hard for writers to do, and really tighten it up to say as little as possible. The imagination and the pictures should take over because I work with an illustrator; I have to. So it is a challenge for me. It is a completely different kind of challenge than when I write adult novels.

Ingrid Winterbach: Soft and slow! I don't think I am going to sell many books with that description! I write; I rewrite, pacing... The writing of a novel is very intuitive. I do not know how to play a musical instrument, but it seems to me as if I am composing when I am writing a novel: where you think you need something faster now, you need a slower movement... So it is composing in a sense. I feel pacing a novel has to do with that, but mostly it is very intuitive.

Marita van der Vyver: Can we just thank you for that question, because we were saying earlier we hope we have some questions actually about writing and not just about things around it!

Andries Visagie: Thank you very much, baie dankie!

Notes

1. On Saturday, 25 March 2006, Andries Visagie conducted this public interview with Afrikaans writers Marita van der Vyver and Ingrid Winterbach during the 9th Time of the Writer Festival in the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre in Durban. The festival is organised annually by die Centre for Creative Arts based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Some of the other writers participating in the festival were Chris Abani, José Eduardo Agualusa, Abdelkader Benali, Bernardine Evaristo, Amitav Ghosh, Kagiso Lesego Molohe, Ishtiyaq Shukri and Eliot Weinberger. I would like to thank Loraine Prinsloo for helping me with the transcription of the interview.

2. See J. C. Kannemeyer's *Die Afrikaanse literatuur 1652-2004* (Cape Town, Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 2005), 625.
3. See J. van Zyl's article "Antjie se asem" (*Die Burger*, 13 December 2002), 17.
4. Marita van der Vyver read from the short story "Circular Flight" in *Short Circuits* (translated by Laura Seegers, Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2005), 205–206, 189–216; Ingrid Winterbach read from *The Elusive Moth* (translated by Iris Gouws, Cape Town, Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 2005), 14–17, 78.
5. Van der Vyver is referring to her novel *Time Out* (2006).