Revisiting Trauma: Writing, a ‘Novel’ Approach to Catharsis and Redemption

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The writing of Does It Hurt to Die began with a shockingly vivid dream that became a violent reality; a reality so disturbing that it inspired a cathartic, medical-mystery thriller. Reality, many believe, is the essence of great fiction. In the novel reality is separated from fiction by the thinnest of wafers. The story was inspired by a real-life event, which almost cost me my life; the memory of which still returns in recurring dreams. Information about the book can be found at www.doesithurttodie.com

Excerpt 1: ‘The Dream’

With a seismic jerk, I was wide-awake and then in an instant sitting bolt upright in bed with my heart pounding in my chest. A menacing odiferous nightmare had woken me and threatened to play out again as I struggled to focus on the digital clock; its eerie fuzzy green glow showing me it was three am. Never before had I experienced a dream of such intensity or detail. Never had I seen such vibrant ecstatic colours: greens, yellows, gold, and purples each with associated sounds all perfectly pitched, screams stereoscopically deafening, as if coming from a far-off world. It was as though I had been transported to a kaleidoscopic, parallel universe to witness the horror unfolding there before being roughly jerked back to Earth.

‘Jannie go back to sleep,’ Renata said, in a muffled voice next to me, scarcely hiding her annoyance at being woken from a deep sleep.

‘I had an awful dream.’

‘People have awful dreams all the time. Go back to sleep you know you have to be fresh to operate in the morning. Lekker slap.’

Renata my wife turned her back, pulling the sheet tightly up around her neck in case in my awakedness I wanted sex; which I did. I knew nothing else was going to distract me from the horrible dream; irrespective of how selfish it might be; sleep, I knew would be impossible without it. I momentarily considered gently stroking her back. Then I remembered her last two words in Afrikaans lekker slap, which means sleep well. That was not what they meant tonight, or had for the last six months. The two simple Afrikaans words had become the equivalent in English of another two vastly different words. No sex. After six months of marriage, her response had become remarkably familiar and frustrating. Sleep well, were two words, which I had become sick of regularly hearing.

A week after we were married Renata made it clear she did not like sex; it was a chore not something to be enjoyed. A fact she managed to obfuscate before marriage by suggesting that no sex was what the bible demanded. There had been no sex before our marriage because she said God in his written word had forbidden it. After marriage, when God should have sanctioned sex, it turned out that her abstention had been a ruse. She did not like sex in any form; in fact, she detested it. Down there, she said was a no-go zone, and sex was only if reproduction was required. To ensure no misinterpretation, or in case I argued on the grounds of conjugal rights, she had bought full-length Florence Nightingale nightgowns. If there, had been any flickering residual passion the thick calico night gowns killed the

reenaissance. As it was they became a barrier even to my deprived imagination. I felt duped, conned into a relationship that delivered her the respectability of marriage but denied me any sex. That I again contemplated tempting rejection dismayed and depressed me.

I pulled the blanket up roughly, covered my shoulders, and put my head back on the pillow. Immediately the essence of the dream returned. Replaying itself in my mind; a large community hall, at the far end of which was a double door with daylight streaming in, hundreds of people milling around in the foreground searching for bargains at a church fete. Serenity and faith clearly on display, each parading its own equipoise. ‘Get down.’ I heard someone scream as four strangely dressed men walked in through the door, creating a sudden blackness in the hall, like a partial eclipse of the sun. People in the hall turned and laughed, thinking these men were part of the afternoon performance, some even began clapping the arrival.

From where I was standing inside the hall, the silhouettes suddenly became something more mephitic; emerging from the silhouettes were hooded black men in camouflage uniforms holding semiautomatic weapons. The terrorists started to fire indiscriminately at those in front of them. People screamed as bullets ricocheted around the room and blood spurted wildly in all directions. Those shot staggered with looks of disbelief, uncertain as to what was happening, others who more seriously injured fell writhing onto the floor; scarlet pools forming beneath them, a panegyric to their unquestioning faith.

The terrorists laughed and advanced throwing grenades, which landed on writhing bodies. I dived to the floor my heart pounding as the grenades exploded on the dying causing abnormal jerky movements. Dead puppets in a St Vitus dance. I looked up, saw a grenade curling through the air in my direction, and lurched upright in bed.

My body shaking I wrenched my eyes open wondering what I would do if confronted with the dream in real life. Dive flat on the floor seemed to be the only thing that I could think of that would perhaps save me in a situation like that. Sleep, I remember came fitfully after that until the alarm woke me at six am. Renata of course had dressed and gone. I was left to shower and to get dressed, a useless erection just a nuisance. Surgery that day would be my only pleasure.

Four weeks later came the frightening reality. Partly because of that dream, I survived the terrorist attack although seriously injured. As in the dream, many unfortunately died. Post-traumatic therapy had not been clinically trialled twenty years ago; counselling for terrorist attacks just did not exist. I started writing primarily to exorcise the demons that would not leave each night; in their place thankfully, a huge enjoyment of writing fiction.

Excerpt 2: The Terrorist Attack and the Church
Jannie started the car and drove slowly towards the church, convinced that no amount of praying was going to prevent a disaster; with the new liver transplant, they were due to do the following day. As he got closer to the church, the rain started to beat down and he had to drive more slowly, struggling with the driving rain to see through the windscreen. The road that led up to St Andrews Church was poorly lit, with the heavy rain all he could see was a scrum of cars parked on both sides of the street, leaving no free parking spaces.
'Damn,' Jannie muttered. There was not a place to park within 800 metres, and having an umbrella, which he knew did not work properly, he would be wringing wet by the time he reached the church. There were two alternatives he thought: go home or brave the rain. Another thought very quickly overrode both alternatives; going to church wringing wet was infinitely preferable to having to deal with Renata’s moodiness. He got out of the car, and half ran, half walked to the old stone church, wondering why it had suddenly become so popular. Despite the weather there would be a thousand people overflowing from the original presbytery into the new wing. Some of the congregation would be blacks and coloureds, which made it unusual for a church, even in liberal Cape Town. Coming from a conservative Afrikaans Boer background, segregation existed, even in churches. St Andrews therefore fascinated him as a church experimenting with racial integration. Attending services was as if one was transported to some foreign country. Not that he ever told Renata, as it was at her insistence that he had first come to St Andrews and he did not want her to think that desegregation worked, even in a church.

As he ran, he held the umbrella half in front of him, his fingers holding the spokes to ensure that it did not blow it inside out. Peering over the top to ensure that he did not run into anyone, he barely noticed several men sitting in a green bakkie in the church car park. A quick glance in their direction unnerved him a little; they seemed to be changing into camouflage uniforms. Unusually they were African men, a thought he then quickly dismissed as insignificant, as perhaps they were part of the service that night. St Andrews he knew was attempting to reach out to the black community and often had services in which they were encouraged to participate. Perhaps that was the reason for its popularity. It was experimental and different, although it was also the message of love that the Minister of the church preached that seemed to attracted whites and blacks. Integration was a concept, which he had always struggled to fully grasp. Educated to consider blacks to be an inferior race, it was hard to imagine loving them as an equal. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to imagine some of the workers on his father’s farm in that way; it was difficult even as a concept as they had always been subservient workers. Nevertheless, it still fascinated him that people wanted to try. He was sceptical, but at the same time curious, that black and white people could intermingle and treat each other with equal respect. As his umbrella blew out, he focused on the final fifty-metre dash to the church.

Once inside, one of the ushers tried to show him to a seat in the front row. Most nights he sat at the front, the pastor insisting that someone with his community standing be a focal point of the congregation. However, the way he was feeling tonight, he wanted to disappear among the worshippers. He smiled politely at the youth group usher and made his way half way up the church. The church was able to accommodate about 2,000 worshippers and tonight was two-thirds full. The innovative design of the church meant that the seating was graduated up towards the back of the church, meaning those at the back were seated approximately ten feet higher than those in the front row.

As he sat down and tried to put Renata out of his mind, he wondered whether he could ask God to help ensure the success of his latest transplant. He then reflected that self-interest and hubris was not a good place from which to begin praying. Even with his rudimentary biblical knowledge, he knew God wanted his servants to think of
others first. As he was contemplating the relative merits of prayerful intercession the choir began with a hymn that he had always liked: ‘How Great Thou Art.’ His affection for the song was partly due to the melody but also the words, which contained so much love and passion.

This evening as he listened it was the pureness of the single young voice rising above the harmony of the choir, which captured his attention rather than the words. The notes were so crisp that he felt the hairs on his neck rising as she sang. The beautiful voice belonged to a young woman of about sixteen years of age standing in front of the choir. She was also the leader of the youth group, and had been instrumental in setting up Christian youth groups in the townships. He closed his eyes momentarily as she sang:

When we reach that heavenly home, we will fully understand the greatness of God, and will bow in humble adoration, saying to Him, O Lord my God, how great thou art.

With his eyes closed and deep in thought he only partially heard the vestry door opening. The door opening during the service was not in itself an unusual occurrence. Quite often St Andrews would have performers enter from a side entrance to give a surprise rendition as a prelude to the sermon. Jannie opened his eyes and looked in the direction of the door; the first person coming in through the door wore a mask. Behind the mask in the spaces around his eyes, he could see the skin was black. That did not disturb him. This was, after all, a growing multiracial church attempting to meet the needs of all ethnicities, a fact that challenged most Afrikaners. However, it did remind him that despite the fact that while religion was interwoven with politics in South Africa; politics was bereft of the love that made a church such as St Andrews work.

Jannie watched as the black hooded mask was followed by a second in a balaclava and overalls. Both carried semi-automatic weapons, and wore pouches tied around their waists bulging forward at the front with hand grenades. Behind the first two, Jannie could now catch a glimpse of three others pulling on hoods.

The thought that this was a novel way to introduce a sermon was shattered as the first black man shot the youth group usher and then turned the AK-47 towards the beautiful young singer. Three rapid shots fired at her from point blank range found their mark and she staggered back collapsing on the stage, blood pouring from her neck and abdomen, her white dress slowly turning scarlet as she lay face down on the floor. Someone in the congregation then began clapping; applauding what they understood was a dramatic staged introduction to the sermon.

Jannie was transfixed. Uncertain as to what was really happening, he watched as the other gunmen quickly entered. Two years of army service suddenly flashed before him. From his gun classification classes he recalled that their guns were AK-47 submachine guns. Highly inaccurate guns beyond twenty metres but deadly at close range. The first gunman was by this time twenty metres up the aisle his weapon on semi-automatic, firing indiscriminately at the congregation. People were crying out at the realisation that something horrible and terrible was evolving. The applause abruptly ceased and in its place an eerie silence between the gunshots, underlining the growing disbelief that this was a terrorist attack.

Jannie could feel his fear building as bullets struck people around him, replaced
by a sense of helplessness at being unable to defend himself. It was a feeling that he had never experienced before. He watched as people less paralysed with fear, scrambled to get out of the line of fire. Others climbed back over pews to try to get away from the advancing gunmen. He tried to subjugate his fear and process his options. Unconscious instructions from deep inside his head screamed at him. Then he remembered the dream and flung himself to the floor behind the pew in front of him.

Lying on the floor, he peered under the pew and between the feet in front of him. The second terrorist advanced in his direction. His firearm was a modern Uzi machine pistol which he held in one hand. With his other hand, he reached into a bag around his waist and pulled out a hand grenade. It was not the type of hand grenade that Jannie had seen and on the practice range during his two years of National Service. This hand grenade was different to all others that he had previously seen. Nails had been crudely stuck to the outer casing, the intention to maim as much as to kill. Whoever the terrorists were, they wanted a bloody massacre.

Tucked tightly beneath the pew, he closed his eyes momentarily not knowing what to do but opened them quickly as he heard the pew splinter. A bullet had embedded itself into the concrete millimetres behind his head. Frantically he looked beneath the pew again for another option. Jannie calculated quickly there were only two realistic options: to stay where he was, or run for the exit twenty metres away to his right.

As he weighed up his choices he looked up and saw one of the youth group members jump up and start running, half crouched-over, heading for the exit. As the young man reached the exit, he did not grab at the release bar, but hit the door with his shoulder in a rugby-style challenge to explode it open. The door shook but did not release; it was locked from the outside. Stunned, the young man turned to look down at the hooded terrorist. For a moment, they faced each other, the terrorists gun pointing at the young man who by now was frantically shaking the release bar, shouting at it to open, and then when it wouldn't dying as the Uzi spat death in his direction.

The gunmen by this time were laughing as they killed. Jannie could see them from under the pew looking around deciding whom to kill next. The first two terrorists stood back to back, laughed, and fired indiscriminately at anyone they could see still moving. The fourth terrorist reached into his pouch, took another nail-filled grenade, and threw it in the direction of a group of visitors. The grenade landed amongst them blowing off arms and legs. One severed leg flew through the air and landed in the aisle next to Jannie. As it lay there, he watched its remaining blood trickle out, staining the carpet in the aisle.

Jannie winced, the memory returning of mercenaries he had killed during in Angola as part of his national service; bodies pockmarked with shrapnel, body parts missing. The despair that he had felt then at such gross human destruction was with him again. The horror of the memories of those disfigured bodies brought with it an inescapable nausea. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out the carnage that had been part of his life in another time, and which now threatened to engulf him again. This was not a place or time to be sick. He fought against the urge to vomit, thinking it may attract the gunmen's attention. He forced himself to open his eyes and peered again along the line of the pew. There was an eerie quietness. Was it over he wondered, had they left, or were they just reloading? He could see nothing at the end.

of his pew and then scanned a small area underneath the pew in front of him. Something caught his eye, which made him freeze.

Rolling down the aisle ten metres away a grenade had landed in its pre-morbid state. Wobbling as it rolled, nails projecting from its casing caused it to follow a curving irregular trajectory. He watched mesmerised as the grenade veered to the left towards a group of pensioners before stopping next to them. Jannie was about to cover his face when, without warning, Noah Smit, one of the youth group leaders, raced from behind a pew and threw himself onto the grenade.

‘You crazy son of a bitch,’ Jannie said to himself as he saw Noah’s body rise slowly, the explosion muted by his body, at the same time shielding all the pensioners from death or dismemberment. As he ducked, again under the pew he knew that Noah would have died instantly. Where did bravery of that kind come from he wondered, as the nausea took hold again. And why was Jesus, the God of love the supposed protective saviour, allowing all this killing in His house.’ He bit down on his tongue and closed his eyes again praying desperately to a God who he was sure was not listening.

As the muffled explosions and the shooting continued, Jannie wondered whether there would be any end before they were all dead. Clearly, the terrorists plan was systematic killing; they would continue until they had killed everyone in the church. He scanned under the pew again and as he did so, he felt a sickening thud. Shot straight between the eyes, the person who had been sitting behind him had fallen over the pew and now grotesquely starred at him under the pew. Jannie could see eyes frozen open in death, blood slowly congealing as brain tissue oozed out through the bullet hole. He had seen death before but not so close that you could feel and smell it.

Nevertheless, he was strangely thankful that he was partly protected by the body and where it had landed, although now it was also difficult for him to move. As he looked at the lifeless face, he could also see the back of the skull hanging from where the bullet had exited. Blood started dripping onto his forearm. He could control the urge no longer and vomited uncontrollably into the face of the dead man in front of him. It took a few moments before he could stop retching, and could attempt to move his head away from the exploded disfigured head. Bodies had now effectively wedged him behind a pew. He had no option but to wait and pray that the killing stopped.

Resigned to dying, he vainly hoped that the terrorists might be moving to another part of the church. He stole another glance under the pew. What he saw shocked him further. In the distance, he could see the four terrorists were now throwing grenades at random. They were pulling the pins and tossing grenades as they walked amongst the remaining congregation. Jannie watched, as one of the terrorists swung in his direction. He instinctively ducked his head as the terrorist saw him move and lobbed a grenade towards him. Out of the corner of his eye he watched it curling through the air, as if in slow motion, the nails stuck crudely to its casing, rotating wildly. The grenade landed and bounced just in front of where his feet were trapped, before making a vitus-like roll down the aisle of the church. The grenade lurched down the aisle until he lost sight of it. He curled himself up as tightly as he could, thinking that he would not see his son again, that this was where his life as he knew it would end. There was a muffled explosion, intense pain, and then blackness.