

**André Brink, *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir* (Harvil Secker, 2009)**

André Brink is one of South Africa's most prominent Afrikaans-speaking novelists, a major literary figure in that country and beyond since the 1970s, when his novel *Kennis van die Aand* (*Looking on Darkness*) was the first Afrikaans novel to be banned by the apartheid regime. This banning made Brink a hero of the anti-apartheid movement, and hereafter he published his writing in English, and enjoyed a steadily-growing reputation abroad. He may not have the passion of Paton, the sensitivity of Gordimer or the subtle power of Coetzee, but he is a significant literary figure, and a memoir from him is an event.

The volume starts conventionally enough with an account of his childhood and youth, when his father, a magistrate, moved the family every four years from one dusty, high-veld *dorp* to another. These villages merge into one another in Brink's account of his childhood, and they are universally characterized by cruelty, hypocrisy and horror. A farmer spends all day in a barn flogging a disobedient child with a hose-pipe; a woman presents a black servant with any food the pigs will not eat; an old man keeps in a case a collection of teeth of sharks, wart-hogs, a lion—and of seven Jews. A labourer is beaten by the police to the point of death, crawls to Brink's father, the magistrate, to complain, and is told to take his grievance to the police who had thrashed him.

The young Brink reflects this society in consistent acts of cruelty to his schoolmates and to any animal unlucky enough to fall into his hands. He sets a trap for birds, catches thirteen and though his father tells him to set them free, he kills them, clumsily and bloodily, one by one. He shoots his first springbok, 'quite a good shot too, on the left shoulder', and bizarrely poses for a photograph with the carcass, gripping it between his thighs and holding its head up so that the creature appears to be alive. This emblematic image, with the pink-cheeked young Brink smiling proudly over his victim, is used as the cover for this volume. 'Something beautiful has had to be killed to satisfy an instinct for maiming and death the boy has never even been aware of' (23).

He organizes his small friends into a school with himself as teacher in order to be able to cane them. He orders his five-year old sister Marita to put her fingers into a power-socket and then flicks on the switch: luckily she survives. Enjoyment of violence and cruelty is deep and strong in this writing, and it is unpleasantly linked with religious obsession. The boy bizarrely preaches to a group of thorn-trees in the veld, and then takes an axe to them: 'I assumed the role of a murderer' (25). His poorly-concealed fascination with violence culminates in the 'murder' of his sister's favourite doll. He drives a stake through the little figure's throat and then stages a funeral, 'little shit that I was', he says convincingly (13). In later life he comes close to killing his dying father: 'I could commit a murder if it came to it', he assures himself (335). The litany of horrors seems unending in these opening chapters, and the reader becomes repulsed and incredulous: were there *no* decent compassionate human beings in these dusty villages?

In the gradual intensification of Brink's acts of violence, he reminds one of another violent youngster, the Australian poet Les Murray, who in 'A Torturer's

Apprenticeship', described how he was saved from committing terrible crimes by the discovery of 'the blood-starred spoor' of Christianity. Brink's writing on the other hand is passionately anti-Christian, and among the worst brutes, sadists and hypocrites in these opening pages are the local minister and other leading figures in the Dutch Reformed Church. Brink's vivid memories include one of rounding up the black adult servants of the neighbourhood and obliging them to listen to an hour of 'blood-curdling preaching' from himself, his theme being that blacks were the sons of Ham, condemned by God to work for whites.

He begins writing as a child, producing novels of which he is proud. He describes them as being full of 'luridly sadistic scenes' (31), and both he and his parents seem surprised when publishers reject them. But he goes on writing undeterred.

After this long beginning the memoir breaks down into scattered chapters which focus on themes or on places to which Brink travels in a long and energetic life. But the basic scene is set: he is a writer tormented by his inner demons, eager to blame them on his background, and struggling to determine where his loyalties lie. His mature novels repeatedly deal with issues of alienation and are replete with images of cruelty and betrayal, often expressed in religious images. Brink, a professed atheist, is as obsessed by God as Richard Dawkins.

It becomes almost impossible for the reader of this volume to assemble a clear picture of Brink's career after the opening section of the memoir. He gives very few dates, avoids narrative sequence, and gives some important figures in his life virtually no mention in the memoir. An endless stream of sexual partners parades through the pages, many of them given no more than a phrase or two: 'Stephanie with her wide smile and her freckled shoulders. Paddy and her drawings in the sand ... Elizabeth, brilliant and luminous ...' (331). He appears to have had five wives, some of whom are not even named in the text.

His loyalty to South Africa is as ambiguous as the dead Springbok on his cover suggests. At the time of Sharpeville, in March 1960, he is in Paris, and the news brings about a crisis in his relationship with his own country. He describes this as a 're-birth', and it positions him as a European rather than as a South African. This does not stop him from returning to South Africa to live, but it does mean that his relations with other Afrikaners, including his own father, become fraught.

Despite his use of English Brink is a profoundly un-English writer, influenced by twentieth century French thinkers including Camus and Sartre rather than English ones. A good deal of his writing about other writers will be of little interest to Australian readers. He includes, for example, a lengthy chapter on the group of Afrikaans writers known as *the Sestigers*, including Etienne Leroux, Bartho Smit, Dolf van Niekerk, Karel Schoeman and others. These are scarcely names to conjure with outside South Africa. Yet they are important to Brink, and one of them, Ingrid Jonker, a talented poet but psychologically troubled, was his lover for a number of years until she drowned herself. Brink did not attend the funeral, 'so I missed that ultimate tragicomedy' (111).

The memoir tails off in a series of chapters which amount to little more than travelogue, interspersed with Brink's strongly expressed but often confused political opinions. He has become a strong supporter of the Afrikaans language he ceased to publish in. His anti-apartheid protest has transmuted into an equally passionate opposition to what he sees as the moral failings of the ANC in the new South Africa.

A visit to Israel produces a sudden outpouring of protest at Israel's treatment of the Palestinians: 'I cannot banish from my memory the terrible remains of Dachau and Auschwitz: for although Israel has never embarked on a genocide on the scale of the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansing this country is inflicting on Palestine amounts, morally, to a slow and minor-key copy of these camps of death. I fail to understand how a people that has staggered from the terrors of the Holocaust could subsequently proceed to do unto others what had been done to them' (392-3).

This book is at one and the same time more and less revealing than Brink intended. Most memoirists try to present themselves in the best light. But Brink, while often mentioning his own generosity and sensitivity to others, is portrayed here as a profoundly distasteful human being. To what extent this is a literary creation, and to what extent an accurate reflection of the man, the reader is left to ponder.

**Peter F. Alexander**