

*so anyway ...* by Helmut Bertelsmann (Jonathan Ball, R99.95)

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Things happened to people in South Africa in the eighties, very few of them pleasant. Thus that dismal decade has generated any number of memoirs and novels, many of the latter having a strong autobiographical slant. This new novel is no exception, in recounting what would seem to be a fictionalised reworking and presumably embellishment of some of the author's own experiences.

Like his protagonist, "Harry", Bertelsmann has worked in independent education in the townships, and Harry's attitudes come through with the emphasis of personal conviction: "So anyway, as you can see, this was never going to the elusive 'great' new South African novel. It seems to have been decreed that that will not agonise over the past. Instead it will take us into a new dimension. You and I, we have to deal with the past." The book is ostensibly addressed to Harry's daughter by his failed first marriage, and the strong personal tone makes for a distinctive voice: abrasive, opinionated, passionate, angry, affectionate, despairing, ultimately hopeful.

Harry works, in the kind of cliché that he hates, at the coalface of black education, in an independent school attempting to provide an alternative to the Apartheid education of the time. As principal of the school, he is passionately committed to providing his pupils with an education to equip them for the post-apartheid society that he knows must come.

His hatred of the regime is taken for granted, and he does not waste much breath on the usual targets: his special anger is reserved for those of his colleagues, allies, comrades, who turn education into a stomping ground for their own egos and political ambitions. Both as educator and as rational creature Harry hates the rhetoric of the struggle which stands in for and supplants rational debate. "Always," Harry says, "I have been riveted by the power of words", and he shows that it can be a power for good as well as for evil. Words are his passion, and if need be he can use them quite as deviously as and often more skilfully than his opponents: "Maybe I can't pack a fridge, certainly I can't read a balance sheet, definitely I can't work a flymo, but talk, hell I can talk, man, I can find the words that will make butter out of cynics' hearts, turn enemies into friends, change screaming red auras into mellow loving pink and blue."

His objection to much of the talk he hears at conferences and "workshops" (dreaded term!) is that it is so out of touch with the issues he deals with daily: "none of these gatherings of the progressive chosen – where we 'share' with others 'around' ('around'!) our work gives me back what I see and hear every day.

Instead, there are mainly intense white women, sincere to the point of pedantry, speaking 'to' their papers (hello, paper, how are you today, me, I'm okay though still a bit nervous), throwing words into a wildly spinning centrifugal mixer that rekaleidoscopes them when it is time for debate, discussion, reflection, 'sharing', worstofallgroupwork." Attacks on the language of the left are often mere disguises for ideological discomfort, but Bertelsmann has no such problem or intention: he can recognise the sound of truth when he hears it, from whatever source. Harry sits up all night reading Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like*: "I wouldn't know how many times that night I shouted out the joyous 'Yes!' of recognition, of shaking hands with truth."

Harry's problem is that he refuses to accept that all the truth is one side. A crucial confrontation is with one Grant McFarren, a colleague and comrade, dedicated to the business of 'conscientising' the pupils: "Until I got to know Grant McFarren, I never really believed in the existence of evil." McFarren's technique is the manipulation of language and his prime target is the teacher of Biblical Studies, one Annemie van Staden – a 'rock' as Harry says, and married to a Conservative Party supporter, but a passionately dedicated teacher. When Annemie is seen helping her husband put up CP posters, McFarren incites the students to demand her suspension, which leads, predictably, to a violent and destructive demonstration in the school.

This is an angry novel, honest to the point of brutality. Fairness and balance are not its salient features, but it has an uncompromising integrity ("How I hate the word today", says Harry) about it, leavened by a good dose of humour, and a passionate affection for this country and its people – well, most of its people. Harry's first wife, for instance, is given short shrift, and remains a somewhat sketchy malevolence casting a pall over his domestic life.

With a new marriage and a new political dispensation much of the anger is transmuted to hope. In the end, Harry tells his daughter, he was motivated by a hope "that you would inherit a cleaner slate, a cleansed reality. Which you did, in a way, you and the equally blessed of your generation, not because of me or my stories. Because of a stiff and upright, wizened and wisened, hardegat and unassailable saint of a bloody stubborn Xhosa chief."

As a very particular, highly articulate and readable perspective on an aspect of the eighties, *so anyway* deserves to be read with more sombre accounts such as Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* or Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. Its unsparing acuteness of insight and unflinching portrayal of one small corner of the struggle make it, apart from a very entertaining read, a valuable record.

This small book, incidentally, is beautifully produced, with a striking cover by Michiel Botha, fast establishing himself as one of the leading designers of covers in the country. It is a pleasure to see a fine novel getting the packaging it deserves.