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Why I Write

Abstract

At first it was easy to answer this question. I said that I wrote because I could not speak (a curious answer from a garrulous person) - because as a black person, an outsider in Britain, I somehow did not have the right to speak. When health visitors or shopkeepers spoke to me in pidgin they constructed for me the choice of silence, of replying in their pidgin, or of replying in a caricatured voice of Her Majesty. Never in my own. My license to speak as a teacher or to speak in the domestic domain never transferred to that of the public, to the arena outside the immediate classroom or the home. This silence rendered me ineffective within institutions, marked me as an outsider and writing seemed to offer a way out of it. I have always tried to write, as a child and as a student but never sustained it. There is a huge leap between having the potential to write - most literate people do - and actually producing a text, an act which also always depends on material conditions.



Zoë Wicomb was born 1948 in the Cape Province of South Africa. Spent 18 years in Britain studying and teaching English. Returned to South Africa in 1990 where she teaches English Language and literature at the University of the Western Cape.

You Can't Get Lost in Capetown was published by Virago.

ZOË WICOMB

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At first it was easy to answer this question. I said that I wrote because I could not speak (a curious answer from a garrulous person) – because as a black person, an outsider in Britain, I somehow did not have the right to speak. When health visitors or shopkeepers spoke to me in pidgin they constructed for me the choice of silence, of replying in their pidgin, or of replying in a caricatured voice of Her Majesty. Never in my own. My license to speak as a teacher or to speak in the domestic domain never transferred to that of the public, to the arena outside the immediate classroom or the home. This silence rendered me ineffective within institutions, marked me as an outsider and writing seemed to offer a way out of it. I have always tried to write, as a child and as a student but never sustained it. There is a huge leap between having the potential to write – most literate people do – and actually producing a text, an act which also always depends on material conditions. I managed it and the terror of speaking has not diminished, but at least I now face myself to do so, even if it is always under the threat of aphasia. What this suggests is that writing for me has become an act of self-validation, something about which I feel uneasy. I ought to have felt validated by being an effective teacher, a job which I believe to be more important than writing. But I suppose since the world does not agree, I have unwittingly, to my own disappointment and in spite of my claims, somehow absorbed its values – another instance of the operation of ideology.

Nowadays I genuinely cannot answer the question. Since I find writing so difficult, such torture really – and I am a painfully slow writer – I don't know why I persist. Academic writing, or my homespun brand of academic writing, is no easier for me. I am driven by outrage at the inequities and injustices that abound in my immediate world and beyond, but why I choose to write I do not know. Teaching, which can deal with issues more directly, is in so many ways more effective as a means of changing attitudes. I am suspicious of those who say that they write for the liberation of their country. All writing is, of course, political and we shouldn't underestimate the importance of literature in the reproduction of ideology; nevertheless it seems dishonest to claim that you write in order to bring about political change. There are other shorter and more effective routes to that end. The notion of the message in effective writing seems to me to be a foolish one since it never includes an investigation of

the elocutionary force of that message. I would certainly send messages if the receivers promised to act upon them, but since no one will do as I say, messages, as used in the Northern British variety of English, are best got at supermarkets.

It strikes me that the question of why you write is as strange as the question of why you like chocolate. It is impossible to 'explain' the vagaries of your palate and perhaps the only sensible thing you can say is that it is marked by ambivalence. You like chocolate because it gives you pleasure but you also know that it is bad for you. I have always liked language, messing about with words, arranging them this way and that, just as others might like messing around with numbers. These activities do not seem qualitatively different; but our culture has given them different values, based, I suspect, on commodification or the marketability of an end product. Perhaps I can only respond to the question by recasting it in terms of why writing is given such particular value in our society and also why social attitudes towards writing or art in general, are so profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand there is absurd veneration and on the other the kind of contempt which sees writers as being engaged in a somewhat unseemly activity, like shitting in public, or as foolish crackpots who deserve no better than to live in poverty. The analogy with the position of women in society is striking: the consecration of women as virgins or mothers or other fetishisation of Woman which at the same time allows women as human beings to be treated with contempt. The oppositional is also, of course, to be found right there in the business of writing: the intensely private which through the very act of committing it to language becomes intensely social; the known which in our attempts to represent in language, turns out to be about what we had not known, what we discover. And so, it seems, having started with no reply to the question, I have replied after all which only goes to show how you can write yourself out of or into anything.

demonstrated that violence is essentially a condition of Apartheid; it has also restored the notion of 'ordinary South African people' (which we will no doubt later wish to contest) who stand in the queues and chat and scratch themselves in the head after the totalising media construction of warring, rampaging, ululating folk. And I must confess to an embarrassing pride (embarrassing because is national/racial – a notion which I have always disavowed) in Nelson Mandela who is indeed, in Simon During's words, the most charismatic living figure of the enlightenment.

However, I also fear for our fragile democracy. How will military values acquired during the struggle be converted to civic values and why does no one address this crucial aspect of reconstruction? Is the military not over represented in the new cabinet and why is this so? What future for writing with the discredited 'Mother of the Nation' in a key role as 'Mother of Arts and Culture'? Why is the obscenity of the Apartheid government reproduced in the fantastic salaries drawn by our new Members of Parliament while our streets are filled with homeless beggars? How long can we expect 'ordinary South African people' to wait patiently for a better life? It is worth remembering Western capitalist commentators on the dangers of the ANC getting more than 66% of the vote, the underlying presupposition being that no one could be expected to invest in South Africa without the safeguard of white power-sharing. In other words, the ANC's failure to gain an overwhelming majority is paradoxically what gives it the remotest chance of being a successful government. But with the firm commitment to mass education and raising levels of literacy, which is after all the first raw material for writers, one can only be optimistic about another generation of readers and writers who will be attentive to the central position of irony and paradox in all aspects of our culture.