



The Wrong Tongue



Bryce Courtenay is an Australian author who was born in South Africa in 1933 and spent his childhood in a rural town. He studied journalism in England, but was banned from returning to South Africa because he had started a weekend school for Africans, which was strictly forbidden at the time. *The Power of One*, his first book, is based on his own experience and was an international bestseller.

Culture Flash

The Boer War (1899-1902) opposed the British and the Boers, Dutch farmers who had settled in South Africa. The British won after bitter fighting.

The Zulu: an African tribe.

The Afrikaaners: white farmers who settled in Southern Africa.

Word help

1. *potirons*
2. *sauce*
3. *chou*
4. malevolent ≠ benevolent
5. to drag: *trainer*
6. *couverture*
7. to gibber: *bafouiller*
8. to guess [here] = to expect

Before my life started properly, I was doing the usual mewling and sucking, which in my case occurred on a pair of huge black breasts. In the African tradition I continued to suckle for my first two and a half years, after which my Zulu wet nurse became my nanny. She was a person made for laughter, warmth, and softness and she would clasp me to her breasts and stroke my golden curls with a hand so large it seemed to palm my whole head. My hurts were soothed with a song about a brave young warrior hunting a lion and a women's song about doing washing down on the big rock beside the river where, at sunset, the baboons would come out of the hills to drink.

- 10 My life proper started at the age of five, when my mother had her nervous breakdown, I was torn from my lovely black nanny with her big white smile and sent to boarding school.

Then began a time of yellow wedges of pumpkins,¹ burnt black and bitter at the edges, mashed potato with glassy lumps; meat aproned with gristle in gray gravy;² diced carrots; warm, wet, flatulent cabbage;³ beds that wet themselves in the morning; and an entirely new sensation called loneliness.

I was the youngest child in the school by two years, and I spoke only English, the infected tongue that had spread like a plague into the sacred land and contaminated the pure, sweet waters of Afrikanerdom.

- 20 The Boer War had created great malevolent⁴ feelings against the English, who were called *rooinkers*. It was a hate that had entered the Afrikaner bloodstream and poked the hearts, and minds of the next generation. To the boys at school, I was the first live example of the congenital hate they carried for my kind.

I spoke the language that had pronounced the sentences that had killed their grandfathers and sent their grandmothers to the world's first concentration camps, where they had died like flies from dysentery, malaria and blackwater fever. To the bitter Calvinist farmers, the sins of the fathers had been visited upon the sons, unto the third generation. I was infected.

I had had no previous warning that I was wicked and it came as a fearful surprise. I was blubbing to myself in the little kid's dormitory when suddenly I was dragged⁵ from under my horrid camphor-smelling blanket⁶ by two eleven-year-olds and taken to the seniors' dormitory to stand trial before the council of war.

My trial, of course, was a travesty of justice. But then, what could I expect? I had been caught deep behind my enemy lines and everyone, even a five-year-old, knows this means the death sentence. I stood gibbering,⁷ unable to understand the language of the stentorian twelve-year-old judge, or the reason for the hilarity when sentence was passed. But I guessed⁸ the worst.

The Power of One, BRYCE COURTENAY, 1989.



COMPRÉHENSION

- 1 Who is telling the story?
- 2 Is the main character black or white? Justify by quoting from the text.
- 3 Pick out two elements proving that the story is set in Africa.
- 4 **True or false?** Justify your answers by quoting from the text.
 - a. The narrator has good memories of his nanny.
 - b. She used to sing to calm him down.
 - c. At school, he was older than his schoolmates.
 - d. Speaking English was not an advantage for him.
 - e. He didn't understand what his schoolmates said because he didn't speak their language.
- 5 What event forced the narrator to leave his home?
- 6 Was it easy for him to leave his nanny? Quote from the text to justify your answer.
- 7 Oppose his life with his nanny to his new life at school. Write three sentences.
- 8 Describe the other boys' behaviours. How does the narrator account for their feelings towards him?
- 9 Explain the words in **bold**: "... sent their grandmother's to the world's first concentration camps, **where they had died like flies** from dysentery, ..." (L. 25)

- 10 What happens to him in the last paragraph? Describe his feelings.
- 11 In the last paragraph, find three words related to justice.
- 12 Complete the following sentences with words from the text:
 - a. A school where meals and lodging are provided is called a ... school.
 - b. Another word for language is ...
 - c. Pupils who are accommodated at school sleep in a ...
 - d. The oldest pupils of a school are called the ...

EXPRESSION

Choose one of the following subjects and write 250 words.

- 1 "I guessed the worst." Imagine what happens after. Write the conversation between the narrator and the other boys using expressions of reproach and anger.
- 2 Words sometimes have more dangerous consequences than acts. Do you agree? Illustrate your point with precise examples.

TRADUCTION

Translate from line 34 "*My trial, of course*" to the end of the text.