

Eighties: The Accidental Activist.

Commentary for SLLS Wits

MA Creative Writing

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published elsewhere.**

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1. Introduction

This reflexive essay is written to accompany the submission of the final draft of text for a University of the Witwatersrand MA in Creative Writing (offered by the School of Language and Literature Studies: SLLS). The main submission (the ‘dissertation’ as it were) takes the form of a novel. It is also intended that the novel should be published after further (substantive) work.

This piece of commentary thus helps to frame the submitted product that it accompanies. As such, it is a guide to assessing the execution of the author’s intentions as these are presented and explored below, hopefully made explicit and as the intentions developed in the process of writing so as to create a literary text. This piece also operates as an ex post facto reflection on what has been achieved. As such, it is a commentary on the produced text/novel, though thinking about what would be in the commentary at the end also helped sharpen the novel writing process along the way.

Unlike an independent review, it benefits from my own insights into what it is I thought I was trying to achieve as an author (and is perhaps undermined by my own blindness or over-estimation too).

I think it is useful for this commentary to accompany the novel’s text. This is partly because it assists the reader as one input and provides one possible set of standards or objective outcomes for working out whether the novel succeeds and at what levels.

The MA too in any case is not simply awarded on the literary merits of the main text, the effort and achievement in producing a good written piece of work that can be published as a novel. The whole process and the written outputs are also an academic or learning exercise, in understanding and analysing the novel as literary form.

This is tempered by the fact that the writing class as constituted is not interested primarily or purely in academic pursuits – like the policy analyst, the novel writer uses his or her academic insights in more pragmatic ways: which is not to say more effective or superior.

Such perspectives also frame this piece of commentary. Various headings below reflect the learning and priority established both by me as a writer and as pointed to in the MA class. This said, it is unclear to what extent a novel can be written as the outcome of an analytical process. What has been produced is surely a text that enables one to understand analytically the requirements of a novel – the route to rewriting for publication is still fairly long.

Some of the limitations of the actual submitted novel have to be accepted as the best shot at what is possible at this point by this author, even if academically or emotionally I might have wanted to do a whole lot more or other different things.

Further, the actual novel when published should be able to stand on its own. The text as it is should be the point of interaction for the reader; in other words, the novel should be read without

the accompanying commentary. Nonetheless, it might be a suggestion to use this commentary as the basis for a foreword or afterword. This could be extended in the published book if there is a strong need to explain to a new or uninformed reader the historical context of apartheid and the anti-apartheid resistance.

I would rather the reader picks up whatever hints, clues, references, there may be in the text of the novel as to the nature of apartheid and the anti-apartheid struggle – any further outside work to fill in other curiosities and desires for information, should they be stimulated, are better the task of the reader as one consequence of his/her reading the book. The novel itself cannot provide this explanation. Nonetheless, in order to fully understand the main character, some engagement with the historical context, which might not be familiar to most readers, is required. This is a text in which the reader is expected to perform significant work to get to know the main character.

It must also be said that writing a novel is difficult beyond imagining (well, not really, but this is claimed with some measure of authorial license).

Apart from making sure the final product is readable it is important to avoid doing writing that is so ‘creative’ – and potentially inauthentic and over-written – that one does not really have the capacity or skill to sustain it (this is a first novel after all and presumably one gets better with practice or learns from mistakes).

The written product as pointed out above had to be produced for an MA class so that it qualifies for degree purposes. This included a process of reporting to a class of colleagues and discussing their work too. This MA reporting and meeting of deadlines for chapters so that they could be discussed in a class, has mostly had advantages, including the deadlines and pressures to complete, the presence of a supervisor, and the fact and privilege of a reading cohort at all stages. These benefits and pressures have shaped the writing in particular ways, overtly and more subliminally. More will be said about this in my discussion of the writing process below.

Submitting the novel as an MA will only be one step towards producing it as a public, published book. Nonetheless, the importance of reaching of a point where it can be submitted as an examinable text should also not be underestimated. It signals one level or place of completion and suggests some satisfaction with, and confidence in, what has been produced at this particular point in time.

Coming up with a plan and outline for a proposed novel was probably the easiest bit. Turning it into characters and a narrative with some meaning, with highpoints and surprises, both novelistic intent and space for reflection by a reader, were all more difficult.

We will have to test in various ways if the submitted novel succeeds. The ultimate test, beyond acceptance for an MA, is whether it obtains a publisher and how the reading public decides to respond.

Right at the beginning of the process I made a claim for my intentions and put a stake in the ground for the approach and perspective I would adopt:

This novel is not to be a history, however, but the story of a particular individual living through and acting in a particular period; a work of fiction that is a mixture of fact and legend.

The question is how does an individual find his place within the swirl and movement of historical events? How do periods of intense experience, ostensibly shared by millions, bring out what is truly human in the lives of people? How do intense emotions and experience shape and get shaped by individual characteristics, histories, emotions, subconscious and conscious choice? What gets left, afterwards, when the intensity or period shifts? ⁱ

Most difficult was finding a narrative voice, deciding on the perspective and the approach. Clarity was required on the main protagonist and the voice of authorial authority in relation to him first. This was necessary to execute the actual writing, and make the work interesting and varied, so that a member of the public might want to read it. It is not even clear, if the question of what voice meant was understood at the beginning or developed more explicitly as writing proceeded – ‘first’ here is not suggested in a purely chronological sense.

The issue of ‘voice’ is absolutely crucial to writing in any way with focus and direction: while the narrator should probably not ‘interfere’ in a magisterial or omniscient sense, there may also be no point in seeking absolute objectivity or in hiding the preferences and interests of the narrator, so that the ‘author’s judgment is always present’. ⁱⁱ

While there needed to be a lot of work on the subsequent draft/s to sharpen it, the initial outline did not change much.

Initially, the supervisor encouraged a process of ‘pouring out’ the words onto the page and of almost spontaneous or stream-of-consciousness writing within the initial plan, just to ‘get on with the writing’ and re-visit it later.

As I said in the original proposal:

I think I need to let the novel start ‘writing itself’ and allow the characters to start taking shape and begin to make their own demands. ⁱⁱⁱ

Having a seminar group going through the same dilemmas as me obviously helped set some key frames that are common to all novel writing. Their responses to drafts that I submitted imposed or opened up a set of perspectives to which I was called to produce reactions and responses both verbally in class and in my writing, so that writing was never actually ‘spontaneous’ or unstructured.

Deciding what weight to give these proto-readers against one’s initial intentions, concepts and ideas required some reflection and decisions.

At points when everybody thought a piece of writing was terrible or when everyone just did not ‘get the point’ of what one had mistakenly thought might be obvious and brilliant, there was no doubt this was a barometer calling for some drastic change. Still, the original idea had to be held onto and remained mine, not theirs as critics, to own.

Right at the beginning of the planning process, it was argued that:

These times in South Africa and the questions we can write about, are a unique part of human experience in the twentieth century, and can speak to many people about how you make choices and how history immerses you. Many people will be interested in what it was like to be part of the resistance to apartheid.

Yet the bigger story, that will allow the novel to last, is how and why ordinary human beings made decisions that had consequences, for themselves, and for those around them. Also how the power of the times – and the abstract or generic processes – can never submerge the frailties and the strengths of human beings, through which history is 'played out'.^{iv}

I do not think the final chapter outline is substantially different from that which I first thought about and put down on paper and its underlying conceptions as expressed above (though many aspects of the eventual writing would reflect other or particular routes to making these ideas work).

However, I could not easily sustain the idea of 'history happening' and the main character simply experiencing the impact of historical events, swept along and washed over by events that make up history in a particular and very intense period of our country and its 'common experience', the nineteen-eighties and the anti-apartheid struggle in the UDF.

There is a logic in the events, in the protagonist being drawn deeper into new, strange and more intense events, and as author I have had to allow the protagonist to develop within this historical frame.

I initially tried to maintain a third person approach with the 'narrator' seeing things entirely as they were experienced by the protagonist. I subsequently changed this to allow a more direct style, writing as a first person narrator. This should have opened up more space for exploring interiority, or finding techniques to represent some of the interior development of the protagonist.

This is a 'remembered' history: an aspect which is made clear early on in the first chapter, by saying 'I remember', and then by the final chapter situated in 2010, where the 'narrator' reflects on his experience and provides a more explicit rubric to potential motives and interpretations of his memories. The reader is still left with the task of interpreting how 'accurate' the narrator's own assessment is.

As Wayne Booth^v shows, there is a variety of approaches even within a first person narration: here, I chose to allow the protagonist largely to see events only as they happen to him, and not to 'know' what is coming. This both emphasises the impact of particular events and the deeply submerged world of motivation for involvement in the 'struggle' by the narrator. This first person approach also allows for an 'episodic' presentation of key events as remembered by the narrator, thus allowing for chronological time not to be a final determinant. Further, this challenges the idea that this is thus a 'realist' novel or presentation of events, though as author I do remain committed in a sense to the outcomes of the struggle for freedom.^{vi}

I do not wish to imply that the original idea of a third person voice, more distant and removed, was necessarily wrong or compromised for the purposes of this novel, but I admittedly did not have the creative or authorial tools to make it happen and to sustain it in quite the way I might have liked. If this means I have opted for a form of second best I hope it is one that still works and maybe is even better under the circumstances.

I eventually decided to find the solution in writing the whole novel from the perspective of ‘myself’ as narrator, i.e. in the first person. This does not mean that there is a straightforward autobiographical self; the narrator too must be subject to critical and readerly interpretation.

This means there is some space for the protagonist to reflect, and to look back on a series of things that happened in his life. This distance also does something else: it creates an uncertainty and a perspective inscribed in the very form of this novel. For the reader, there remains an uncertainty – is this actual memoir, or a ‘fictional’ recreation? This is an ambiguity that helps to sustain the readers’ interest, though neither approach would any less require authorial temperament and judgment to be present.

The reader is always uncertain as to what is actually true, whether this actually happened, although the background events are clearly part of a common and ‘true’ history. I believe this ambiguity gave me more space to write and to achieve what I had set out to do. This first person contract with the reader does suggest an authenticity that the reader may play along with: however, in the end, like the narrator, history is not a given and facts of the past are not simply true but have to be remembered and interpreted or analysed.

2. Original intention

This is a ‘post-struggle struggle’ novel.

In other words, I did want to recover the events and meaning of the political struggle as significant in shaping where we are today as South Africans. While Ndebele^{vii} argues that politics should be subordinate to the complexity of character, I did not want to dismiss political events or ignore them or hide away their centrality and importance, even in the shaping of the main character and his choices.

At the same time, I did not want politics and the idea of heroism of activists to be the main theme (a common ‘political’ or ‘politically correct’ understanding), but rather I wanted to undermine and challenge such conceptions. This also makes the story potentially more universal and challenging as it means it is more human and authentic and real. It is what Ndebele means when he says that one should ‘strenuously avoid (s) the kind of heroism that scores points without being, at the same time, a celebration of achieved triumph’^{viii}. Or, more strongly, ‘moral ideology tends to ossify complex social problems into symbols.’^{ix}

Nonetheless, South Africa in the nineteen-eighties was a particular and intense historical period. I wanted to capture the motives and complexities of an individual caught up in a period where history made certain demands and set certain boundaries. The fact that political freedom has opened up more space to address the ‘personal’ – indeed, the personal is still under-written – surely does not mean the historical and political imperatives should forever be put aside. How one recovers them, in a ‘post-political’ way that can be interrogated in new and fresh and open ways, is part of the challenge which I hope this novel grapples with. Much contemporary South African literature grapples with the ‘new-found’ personal space, but perhaps still struggles to re-incorporate a strongly political history and past into this equation.

As argued above (and to repeat):

...we can write about... a unique part of human experience in the twentieth century, and can speak to many people about how you make choices and how history immerses you. Many people will be interested in what it was like to be part of the resistance to apartheid.

Yet the bigger story, that will allow the novel to last, is how and why ordinary human beings made decisions that had consequences, for themselves, and for those around them. Also how the power of the times – and the abstract or generic processes – can never submerge the frailties and the strengths of human beings, through which history is ‘played out’.^x

The novel is written from the perspective of a white activist, who either falls into things or chooses to get involved, and through these choices finds himself in spaces that are new to him, where he has much choice but also where his range of responses is constrained. This issue of agency is a constant throughout the book. While the first person narrator could or should allow much space for interiority and the exploration of the narrator’s own decisions at points in time, this is perhaps a less developed arena in the dissertation that could be explored further should I decide to revise the manuscript for possible publication.

How does Jeremy cope and develop as history explodes around him and enters his life and the choices he can make?

I may just add that another advantage of going back to the original proposal/conception and the chapter outlines, at various stages through the process of writing, is that it helped to sharpen the purpose or intent of the piece. What was the point of describing this scene and these events with these people in this chapter? What was it that I had hoped to add? As I went into more of an editing phase, it also meant I was a lot clearer about why certain descriptions might be irrelevant and should just be cut.

3. Outline of chapters

The format of this novel/MA is chronological and fairly straightforward in the way it is presented. Nonetheless, it is not written in 'real time': events are recalled (if in chronological order) as they have significance to the main protagonist. Events are situated in the familiar landscapes of Cape Town in the nineteen-eighties and against the background of real struggles and events and even some real people. One could name some of them. Chapter headings are dated according to significant periods and events that 'actually happened'. Centrally, however, the point is that this is not a history or a memoir, and characters and the narrative must in the first place meet the requirements of fictional autonomy and integrity.

Through the book a character (Jeremy) acts, responds in complex ways, meets new people, goes to new places in a country he did not know before, falls in love, and reflects on what he did and what he may have achieved. A description and some imperatives/intentions are described below:

1. The first chapter sets the scene, a horrifying scene of torture on a very young person, which surely must impact on his responses later on and to his future involvement in politics, the possibilities open to him and potential choices, how he is seen, his hesitations and the commitments and involvements that he cannot evade or decides he will not evade. The protagonist establishes a relationship with history, with politics, and with the state in the form of the Security Police (who ban him), as well as reflecting on and learning about his family past of Jewish immigration with which these events and his own personal make-up are intertwined. This first chapter establishes for the reader identification with the main character through a horrific torture scene, and also provides a potential explanation for why the main character responds in certain ways later on. Surely such a deep and traumatic experience would have effects – in the novel, it appears as if the narrator is affected, but does not always himself understand what impact this first set of events had on him (hesitation, distance from events, commitment without thinking of consequence). This intense experience frames the readers' understanding of Jeremy and develops some sympathy and identification with him.
2. In the second chapter, many years later, he gets drawn into things as a new political front, the United Democratic Front or UDF, is launched. In this chapter he accepts the challenge of political involvement yet takes on a very specific role – he is to do 'catering' and to act as backup to the main cast. In this chapter, he does meet the political cast who will give him direction, and he gets drawn to a 'soft' involvement that is caring, interesting and new. He meets new people, mostly women, getting produce to supply the food to delegates at the UDF launch, going to Wynberg and the Salt River market outside of his usual zones. Jeremy has an eye for a good-looking woman. However, his relation to marijuana as self-medication suggests all is not under control or comfortable.

3. In the third chapter, he travels out into a coloured working-class area and has his first experiences of organising work. He is carried along in the excitement; Lizet starts to emerge as his guide. His friendship with Beeton is introduced, a more outgoing and expressive character than Jeremy but less certain of life. Beeton will be a kind of 'action' foil to Jeremy, a reassurance, perhaps a slightly comic character yet one who embodies many of the traits that are most human in an activist. He is slightly larger-than-life – this is how Jeremy as the narrator sees him.
4. His relationship with Lizet develops and he gets to know her better, sitting and drinking champagne in a parked car. She challenges him to respond and to find his own community. In the process, we must ask who he is and what he and Lizet want both personally and politically. The question of racial identities as a key marker is established. We start to know more of what drives them both, at the same time as they are starting to be brought together by circumstance and subliminal choice or need.
5. Jeremy does his own thing in the white areas, calls and leads a public meeting through which his powers and his reach increase. It is all very exciting to a young man to be cast as a leader. He finds strength in his own white constituency where he may or may not belong. He feels his confidence grow as any reservations about involvement in the struggle disappear.
6. Jeremy attends a march and a funeral in the African areas some years later. Suddenly, the stakes have grown higher as history has shifted. It is not a game. There are now Casspirs, arms and young soldiers on the scene. From his base as a white, Jeremy moves out into the African areas where real battles are being fought and people are being killed. It is still exciting, his involvement is reinforced and he is also forced closer to Lizet.

The times are shifting fast. The reader must work out how the resistance grew and got more intense– this is not a history as such. Events are presented in an episodic fashion. Nonetheless, it is clear how the events 'escalate' and Jeremy finds himself more and more 'up to his neck' in processes that are becoming more and more dangerous and consequential. It is not simply the chronology that holds the novel together, but rather the events that seem significant to the narrator as he looks back. It is the process of understanding that has driven the narrator to involvement that must ultimately hold the readers' concerns and interest.

7. 1986 forces Jeremy into hiding, to retreat from active involvement in the world outside. Being in hiding and its anonymous loneliness propel him into weird, apparently dysfunctional and ambiguous responses. There is potential gay sex that challenges easy markers about his identity (it is not so easy to simply 'work in the white areas' as a sole and politically-defined identity). While he grows even closer to Lizet, and this personal relationship defines his interactions more than outside events, he also has sex with her that is almost brutal and somewhat dysfunctional despite the common consent. We start to discover the shock and trauma that is building up and now surfacing. Sex here serves as a kind of index of personal and complex (confused)

desire, intensified both by the events and the narrator's inability to understand what is happening to him and what the pressures may be.

8. His relationship with Lizet is consolidated as they move in to make a home together. Yet their situation means Jeremy cannot really engage more widely with people, even with neighbours. It is a world in which all around people appear as traumatised, even people who are not politically involved. Jeremy is passive in his life, a removed observer who can only shape or influence his domestic surroundings at the most. The intimacy found with Lizet thus also isolates him.
9. Finally, the breakthrough of defiance occurs as the people shake off their fears. Jeremy again leads a protest, to sing happy birthday to a leader 'imprisoned' at Groote Schuur Hospital. Then he finds himself on Athlone Belgravia Road, where events are a notch or two more intense, harsh and real, at the same time as they have a surreal dimension. Once again Jeremy is unable to respond meaningfully. His one single response is driven by anger and paradoxically reflects his impotence.
10. Jeremy ends up in prison, unsurprisingly. What is surprising is how the rhythm and space in prison in fact suit him and allow him space and time to reflect, even relax. Removed from the excitement and the pressure of struggles outside, he is still with his friends (Rev Allan, Beeton, even Lizet and his mother) so he not only feels supported but can sense the prospect of victory as the tide turns. In prison, he begins to find freedom.
11. Many years later, Jeremy reflects on the events and his past that shaped him so profoundly. He has and he hasn't achieved his goals – South Africa is free, but he is not sure where he stands as an individual. His family history and his identity as offspring of Jewish immigration are brought to the fore by Jeremy as narrator where previously there were just hints and clues. This past seems to have been central after all in shaping his desire to plunge himself into events and find belonging in the nineteen-eighties. While he has journeyed into a new country to find belonging and adventure, he is now much more ambiguous and more thoughtful. His dilemmas are left unresolved. In the end, he is alone again. One constant is the strong awareness of the natural environment, of 'Cape Town'. Activity and activism are followed by contemplation.

4. Finding a voice

The hardest issue, perhaps the most central to all others, is finding a voice.

From what perspective is the narrative written? Not just who speaks and writes, but who is the person who speaks? The central character or protagonist and his responses define the viewpoint – but what is this viewpoint?

Many in the class suggested I should rather be writing a memoir, in a sense a real history of what I experienced. I resisted this. Memoir and historical reflection might seem similar or the opposing ends of a literary spectrum. This written piece in particular wished to avoid the demands of a full history or ‘truth’ and emphasize rather the remembered nature of action and activity and circumstance. A memoir would have to justify why certain things are left out and would have to include a whole set of real events that happened. I did not want to tell my own story. More personally, perhaps, I also dislike the potential for arrogance in autobiography or memoir. It would certainly be disingenuous to pretend my ‘own story’ is not deeply inserted in the text. The novelistic form though gives more freedom to ignore or reshape ‘actual’ events.

The novel is thus seen as a powerful form through which to carry over certain issues and gives room to explore some others. While this novel is situated in history it is not written as history.

I wanted to capture the ambiguity of political involvement, so that readers who may or may not have lived through this period can in their own ways understand or propose why people including themselves would respond in certain ways. I did not want to set up Jeremy’s responses as the only legitimate ones or to suggest that there was a politically correct way to get involved in events. Ambiguities and uncertainties in the motives, reasons and choices underlying any particular character’s responses were perhaps the central theme of the book and drove the authorial methodology.

It is true there are indeed many things in the book I did live through and have experienced which maybe provide the basis for me to write more authentically or to bring unknown and interesting processes into the reader’s vision (e.g. life in prison or in hiding; the nature of meetings; grassroots organising). However, there are also many things in the book that I did not do that are written about; many of the characters are amalgams of real people at the time.

So the main voice is not actually ‘me’. In any case, even if it were ‘me’, it would not be as if this removed questions about authorial objectivity and reality^{xi}.

The chronology of the events remains in a way a central ‘character’ or driving force. The chronology is driven by intensifying events that make logical and creative sense as the struggle moves from ideas and concepts to sharper battles and eventually imprisonment and repression.

Within this logical sequence that has a strong but not over-powering force, a character can respond in a host of ways. Jeremy in this case responds and is shaped as a child of immigrants trying to find his place and position; and he is a youth finding excitement, adventure and love.

In the 'community of struggle' he finds a sense of belonging, and a validation of his ideas. He meets people he likes. He is a rebel and the anti-authoritarianism gives him a sense of adventure. He is young and he is making himself. He likes this rapidly moving world where there is a huge commitment; but a kind of anarchic sense of not holding onto things, of unpredictability, of being able to say goodbye and moving on. He finds some sense of purpose and action that cuts through his fears and alienation. He breaks a whole series of boundaries, and learns a whole lot of things about his country, and some things about himself.^{xii}

Initially, I wanted to frame only the first and last chapters in the first person: the first chapter because the scenes of torture are particularly shocking and the trauma must affect future responses; and the last chapter because this would frame the story and allow the events in between to be seen as distant and mediated, while drawing the middle history back clearly to the person reflecting in the current period.

Quite frankly, I did not have the creative genius and the writing tools to sustain this. Amongst other things, I would have had to creatively use external responses and signs to show how Jeremy felt and moved; and I could not do this without resorting to cliché (e.g. he 'raised his eyebrow' or 'looked intensely' or 'moved away').

The first person throughout gave me the space to more easily include interiority and to reflect on what Jeremy was thinking.

Obviously, this can be overdone and has its own potential weaknesses. I realised especially that while the rule is 'show, don't tell' this is enormously hard to sustain and is not necessary to be maintained either, as long as the rule is broken carefully.

I still had to resolve 'voice' issues. The first draft of the main text was written with not much clarity in a variety of styles, had some very poor attempts at humour, much overemphasis on irrelevant aspects of the narrative, too much unnecessary detail.

I also had to ask more carefully what kind of person Jeremy was – concerned, traumatised, young and therefore captured by excitement, a leader but not good at expressing himself and his desires, and torn between action/initiative and passivity: an Accidental Activist, someone who stumbles into things and yet whose make-up and personal history also impell him in particular directions.

To summarise:

- I changed to first person throughout. 'Distance' and reflection had to be captured in part through the process of 'looking back' and giving the narrators' own interpretation of the impact of the events. Room is still left for the reader to read' this presentation of the narrator's self.
- I also couldn't sustain the idea of history 'washing over' a character and needed more room for interiority and reflection: hopefully without doing away with the idea of history as a main and shaping character.

- I feel the ambiguity of whether it is a novel or actually a memoir helps to maintain interest for the reader and is itself a way of achieving some distancing from and creating uncertainties about the events of the period.

While there are many clues as to who Jeremy is, the reader will have to work out why he responds in certain ways: was the torture trauma defining; how important is his family background; why is he sometimes passive and sometimes in charge; what motivates him to accept involvement and what choices/limitations/boundaries does his involvement and the changing context then pre-figure for him?

It is quite likely that these issues could have been explored more fully in the novel itself. It perhaps is a text with 'open places'; the limited interiority means that Jeremy still remains to an extent mysterious. In preparation for publication, this is one area that will quite likely require amplification – there are 'clues' but perhaps not enough coherence to satisfy the reader once he/she is asked to purchase a published novel.

5. Developing a narrative

In a novel, the character and story develop, there are certain high or crunch-points where things come to a head, and there is need for a climax. I decided to run with things chronologically and allow the logic of growing and intensifying events to define the narrative. Gaps between the central episodes also suggest a reliance on the historical narrative to provide its own 'logic'. Jeremy reduces his own development and what he did in these gap periods to a subordinated acceptance that implies the domination of history in his mind. The real history of the 'eighties in a sense provided the script. While there are weaknesses in terms of wanting more pacing from the narrative, I think it also had a logic that was very acceptable.

For these reasons, the chapters are divided along time markers. They are not equally spaced or phased and speak rather to what is important in Jeremy's life as it develops.

Still, if anything, the events run extremely fast and are described in a compact way. Perhaps the pace of things is quite dizzying for the reader but this reproduces the impact on Jeremy of a hectic, unpredictable progression of events with little room to catch one's breath.

At least the reader can put the book down. Jeremy has no such choice as new things and places keep streaming at him. The reader is challenged to work out how one might cope in such a situation, and use this dizzying pace to understand why Jeremy reacts in certain ways. The narrative selection and structure thus anticipates a certain kind of readerly response.

Does Jeremy even have a choice to withdraw once he is caught up?

There are four kinds of responses that define Jeremy and give us insight into him as he reacts (positively and actively or often passively) to events. These move through the narrative as it is traced in the journey of the main character Jeremy.

1. Firstly, the excitement and adrenalin and curiosity of his pacy life keep him involved. He is young, clearly interested in politics, The narrative selection and structure thus anticipates a certain kind of readerly response and is driven by his past of insecure belonging and immigration. Many of these motivations are largely implied, and perhaps submerged in the text. All these issues impel Jeremy to get out and take a lead and interact rather than retreat.
2. Secondly, he cannot always keep control and does not surface or know what is happening to him, so that things flare up at points – he takes drugs, he has uncertain sex, and he doesn't reflect much on his motives, all a recipe for ambiguity and even dysfunctionality. The last chapter allows him to reflect and pull some things in his life together with the wisdom of time and distance, to try knowing himself better. The last chapter is absolutely crucial in allowing 'distance' and for a critical reflection, not only by the narrator but also by the

reader. Its successful implementation as a chapter is quite important, especially when the novel is to be formally published.

3. Once Jeremy has made certain choices, his next moves are constrained or limited, e.g. once he has agreed to serve on a committee of the UDF, he can hardly just pull out and must feel pressures to at least do what they want or expect him to.
4. At the end, although the events have ostensibly brought freedom to South Africa and Jeremy played a/his part in this, we have to ask if this is all really so crystal clear. What was actually achieved? As a human being, how does Jeremy get left by these events at the end, and are his own issues resolved? What and when is freedom? The whole novel implies a debate about this, and of course an inherent tension between a more personal definition and a more social/political definition, and how these intersect.

Much of the storyline appears episodic. There are big gaps that are not always equal in time. We jump from 1976 to Jeremy at the beginning of 1983. Nothing much happens from 1983 and the launch of the UDF up to the events of the funeral in Guguletu, the state of emergency, then defiance and imprisonment. The last year or two has a concentration of events and impact.

The episodic nature of the book chapters could be a basis for criticism or could be a way of understanding things. Jeremy remembers his life through key, but disjointed, events. These are drawn together in the final chapter.

The historical storyline of apartheid and struggles against it will have to be discovered elsewhere than the novel – although histories of these times are few and far between – and the reader will have to imagine what Jeremy did in the gaps between described occurrences. (Apart from articles, it is true that only one book really covers this period in some detail.)^{xiii}

Looking back, Jeremy as protagonist naturally selects the episodes that had the most meaning for him and focuses on these and not their connections. It should be logically and internally consistent as to why these chosen events are important. It should contribute to the development of the novel.

Does this make things too bitty for the reader? Or does it challenge the reader to think about how ‘history happened’ and about how we relate to it, both at the time we are immersed in history as well as many years later when we can perhaps attempt to consolidate our thoughts, learnings and opinions?

Just as Jeremy tries in the last chapter to consolidate and understand his past involvement, there is a challenge to the readers to also do some work and decide themselves if they accept Jeremy’s explanations as to why this narrative is the best one to understand him.

Apart from the narrative itself and its logic and climaxes or interesting points along the way, fellow class mates often asked questions that they wanted me to fill in with more information as a writer. Examples include:

- How did apartheid manifest itself in people's lives?
- What was the background to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and what did it stand for?
- What in Jeremy's childhood led him to involvement in the 'struggle', what was the background to him ending up being tortured in 1976?
- Why were activists like Jeremy so disconnected or even passive?

These are important questions. It is not for the narrative to provide answers however, rather to provide enough description so that such issues can emerge. The narrative should provide some clues and pointers along the way to help develop answers. In real life, we never know all the background of a character. The questions above – challenged and provoked and moved by the novel – are precisely the questions the reader should ask, reflect on and develop their own answers. Yet the ultimate decision of the novel was to focus on personal experience rather than on an attempt to reflect history, and that implied sacrificing attempts at historical completeness.

6. The main character

Why is Jeremy apparently so bland? He is in many ways not a classic protagonist; despite living through heroic times, it is hard to tell if he performs any heroic actions himself.

We get to know him a bit, though there are only slim clues: he is shy, suspicious and even threatened around new people, and he is not very expressive unless he is leading a large crowd. Yet he is brave, refuses to answer questions in interrogation and joins the struggle despite knowing its risks and his own experience of trauma and torture as a student.

He does fall in love. He also suffers and expresses his traumas in dysfunctional and sudden eruptions, usually through sex. Sex is either 'threatening' but tempting as in the toilet scene, or even violent as on the mountain: it is never uncomplicated and does not express easy eroticism or even human feeling, certainly not unambiguous love. Jeremy self-medicates with marijuana. He seems to struggle to know himself.

There is a range of both active and passive responses. When events are most intense, as in Belgravia Road, he simply stares and observes immobilised.

All of this is the basis for calling him an Accidental Activist: A provocative title because his involvement is not really that accidental. In some ways it provides him with opportunities to explore new identities; to try and test what he might become when he crosses conventional boundaries.

Explanations for why and what he is are things he cannot himself put forward with clarity or certainty and mostly it is left to the reader to work it out. Jeremy is clearly influenced by his past, by his Jewishness and his family history of immigration. His youth and sense of excitement, adventure and curiosity perhaps explains his initial (youthful) enthusiasm and journeys out of his white comfort zones into discovering new communities.

He starts and ends in jail. Though there is a reflection he tries to perform many years later, it is done tentatively and perhaps not thoroughly or incisively. He is even at the end still not sure of what happened; and what the reality around him reflects. One never reaches a point where 'pure reflection' is possible.

Other characters swirl into his life, interest him, but are never persistently encountered. Thus they also do not develop through the novel and might be what Forster calls 'flat' characters^{xiv}. Seen through Jeremy's eyes, it would not make sense to round them off decisively. Jeremy has an eye for pretty women, prefers the warmth and comfort of women, likes company, but doesn't seem to give much except maybe a passive strength and quiet support. This reflection of Jeremy's relationships to other people and to the events in the novel shows he is distant, a bit detached, yet nevertheless obviously impacted by events and relationships.

Perhaps this does not make for very dramatic narrative development. We are unsure exactly how Jeremy has grown or changed as a central character and how much. This potential weakness in characterisation is also reflected in the episodic narrative, with ambiguous if intentional 'progress'.

It is only in prison that Jeremy gets a 'real time' chance to reflect and to realize the importance of not running around madly doing things all the time. Where continuous activity is his way of evading himself, in prison he finds the slow rhythms attractive. Now he more consciously structures his time and space. Paradoxically, prison frees him.

His reflections at the end of the novel are bittersweet; he does not reject his past but does wonder about its importance in the greater (historical) scheme of things.

The danger is of course not to use the narrator as a short cut, as a way to make statements or pronouncements rather than to show how things happened and how they worked. At the same time, it is important to get to know the state of mind and the perspectives of the narrator in order to know him better. In addition, his 'commentaries' are very much part of exploring the rhetoric and the emotional demands and coping mechanisms of the times. But they must not be presented as truths, but as ambiguities and characteristics that help the reader assess the persons they are shown, including the narrator, and others through the narrator's eyes.^{xv}

7. Writing style

As the novel is seen through Jeremy's eyes, the description and what is visible need to reflect this.

I learned early on that 'less is more' in description. Also, that the capacity to write lyrical or thickly descriptive text requires writing skills that probably are unlikely to be present in a first attempt at a novel. Under-writing and a tight editing process are clearly a better, more viable option.

Letting words simply flow helped in getting the basic story out. The stream-of-consciousness approach however tended to lead to repetitious ways of expressing things and stylistic uniformity – either by using short sentences, or constructing similar sentence structures that quite quickly became boring.

Avoiding this sin required a supervisor who was able to point this out and some resources that enabled me to vary how I put things down. Pacing had to relate to what was being described.

As already noted, while interiority may be expressed through external reactions and actions, and how these actions or responses are interpreted by people around a protagonist, it made for a set of challenges that would be hard to sustain through good writing. Writing in the first person gave more room for exploring Jeremy's own thoughts and reflections. I think the trick was not to over-do this.

The last chapter is a reflective chapter. It is set some years later, in an uncertain and undefined period, though dated specifically. It obviously frames the book as if all the events described in the book, immediate as they appear, are still seen with the benefit of hindsight.

I have already explained why I think this is helpful and necessary to the writing process and to the style and narrative. I think it is a device, an artifice indeed, but I would argue that it is not artificial or forced. I try not to overdo the last chapter, although many of the objectives of the book are finally brought out and surfaced in an explicit way there.

It was also important to put aside the writing from time to time and to return to it later after some period had passed. A writer has a tendency to have a whole image of the scenes in mind and thinks a brief description often evokes this – or may on the other hand over-describe. In either case, how it may come across to a reader can be completely different. A fresh eye on what was written a while before helps to see the writing anew. It was important to leave the text for a long time and to come back to it reasonably fresh, without too many preconceptions about what one thought one had said or hoped had come across. This enables one even as creator or author, to try look at the text as a new reader might.

It was helpful when the whole MA class found scenes boring or pretentious or silly or inauthentic, as this gave an external gauge that must at least be taken seriously and engaged with. The experience and input of the supervisor was also crucial.

Most important to 'style' was also clarifying and finalising voice and perspective, so that the style of writing could reflect where the main character was coming from. This combination proved very difficult.

It is also worth saying that there surely is not meant to be a single interpretation of things as defined by the writer's intentions. The reader too will have a viewpoint on why and what happened to the character and to the writing.

The task of a clear style of writing is to provide enough material for the reader to engage and interact with while also to feel interested and driven to read more.

8. Writing process

I thought I would be finished a long time before I did actually reach some sort of writing conclusion. I thought there would be a fairly direct writing trajectory to the end and originally projected a timetable that took me to the middle of the second part-time year (2007-8).

I struggled with an ending and with tying things up. Do the reflections at the end bring out the kind of lessons the protagonist might have learned without resorting completely to artifice? And did I insert enough clues throughout the text so that the motives and hesitations of the protagonist could be open for the reader to understand and perhaps explore?

One point to make about writing process is simply the discipline of writing. There were long periods where my day-job and other work took priority. This was particularly true as I launched into the stakeholder management process implied in producing an 'Education Roadmap' at work. Despite actually taking six months off work so I could allegedly focus on my MA, in fact, the novel did not 'appear' spontaneously in this period. The bitty on-off nature of the Roadmap process through this time meant that my mind was continually being pulled in different directions.

The problem was that while my mind was often full of other professional activities and the planning and innovation required, I could not really get my thoughts around the requirements of the novel and thinking through what next steps were needed.

The most interesting diversion was the production of a non-fiction work in the middle of the process. Towards the end of 2008, I was approached to write a book on education. While I had written a basis for many chapters in various press op-eds and through lecturing in education in previous years, the non-fiction work obviously required research and much editing and writing attention. There were technicalities like checking the index or proof-reading. Some of the knowledge I was getting through the MA process probably came through or were tested or developed in the writing of the non-fiction book – in particular, the question of voice, and of a logical and interesting narrative.

While the 'Toxic Mix' has subsequently sold well, and been well received – it has found new (black) reading audiences, it made it onto the *Sunday Times* book award long lists and also subsequently went into re-print – it also led to much publicizing and promotional activity to a wide education constituency. Perhaps this book was the book that should really have been written as part of the MA? In any case, it provided an interesting and (welcome?) diversion from concentrating on and creating time to write the novel, which should have been my primary pursuit.

Was being part of a class a positive experience to the writing process?

There were very many different kinds of books being written. These included a children's book, a journalistic account of South African dilemmas, very 'interior' books about loss and death, and

an account of a visit to a family member affected by disability. So MA criticism came from fellow aspirant-authors with very different interests.

Bloom, Von Holdt and Altbeker were closest to me in terms of my starting points and understanding or sharing my ideological interests. Bloom's is a younger perspective, perhaps more critical of current social and political realities and also less committed to them than an eighties activist having a more historicised approach. Bloom is less forgiving and perhaps more angry. In this novel, Jeremy is thoughtful and questioning rather than critical. Bloom wants to find 'ways of staying'; Jeremy is unsure and ambiguous about himself and wants to tell his story and include the more human, unstable side, but is very much discovering a country he intends to fight within.

A number of the colleagues' works made an attempt to situate their books as South African, perhaps exemplified by the children's book of Karen Hurt and a book about a girl breaking from traditional values as well as Bloom's book, though they did this in different ways.

I do not think there was consistent and detailed reading of everything one wrote. However, everyone had to do at least a cursory reading and have one or two primary comments if they expected their chapters to be read in turn. Much of the comment was based on a fairly quick reading – the advantage maybe being that when a member of the public picks up a book, they are also going to read and react relatively superficially and not study the book in detail. The range of writers in the class also meant a range and variety of readings/interpretations/needs which reflects what might happen if the book is out in the public domain.

Of course, one's chapters were read as parts of an unfinished work. Comments were geared to helping the re-writing of particular chapters and improving the focus and style of future chapters. The combined concerns of all the writers probably channeled a common and similar trajectory to all the writing as they, too, were working on partial and unfinished scripts. This meant there were fairly superficial but nonetheless helpful summations of common issues any author should face. These include issues such as those dealt with above about narrative, about authorial voice, about perspective.

I think possibly the most useful aspect of the class was to get a summative feeling, a kind of collective gut feeling as to whether one's attempts were working and finding resonance. In many cases my intentions were clearly not getting across. I sometimes found members of the class asked questions and had expectations or wanted further explanations which related to the ambiguities the novel sought to bring to the fore. Sometimes my classmates wanted detail to be answered or gaps to be filled in that I felt were their job to speculate about. They could not expect easy answers on much of the detail from me; the point for the reader is precisely to 'figure it out' on the basis of the information they had been given by me. Life is like that.

I did not succumb very often to the pressure to find an answer. Only when the whole class seemed in agreement that a piece written was very obscure, when they just did not get it or when they unanimously objected to a particular approach, would I take it into absolute consideration.

Otherwise, I mostly just ploughed ahead as I saw fit and as I saw best would meet my intentions and my abilities. Most important, was having a community of writers around me like myself, who were struggling to write well, and were willing to give moral support. The fact that some of them also reached the end of their writing process (and some like Kevin Bloom were published to acclaim) was also an inspiration and a spur to keep going.

I need to say something about having a supervisor. I think this was the most valuable part and benefit of the MA experience. In my case, it was also someone with both a background in publishing and editing work in the book world as well as an academic location (like many of the other lecturers too guiding the class). He was able to provide personal and intellectual solidarity, guidance and support. He was able to understand what it was I thought I was trying to do and to advise on how to do it. His comments ranged from showing where individual passages were unnecessary or badly written (e.g. too sentimental) to pointing out stylistic repetitions that were becoming boring or losing impact to deeper structural queries.

Does a particular scene actually contribute to what the book is trying to do or is some of the description irrelevant? Why does this character appear and then get left so that as a character she is completely undeveloped? At the same time as developing enough of a confident personal relation to be quite honest and even harsh in criticism when needed, the supervisor played a role in defending the book's intentions and approach in the actual class situation. Here commentary from fellow classmates might be superficial or not based on a very detailed reading, so that the third-party insight or defense by the supervisor was able to point out why my approach was legitimate. This defense added to my confidence and ability to pursue and complete the project.

Finally, the supervisor read the manuscript in fine detail and proposed a host of minor editorial changes as well as more high-level 'policy' questions: this meant that the manuscript as finally submitted was a great improvement on the first draft and was produced under guidance and with some confirmation. A place was created where I could test my own ideas and hear myself speak.

Is my book complete? Is it everything I would want it to be? I don't think so. Once one has gone down a particular road, one can then revise and rewrite up to a point. One more or less has to live with the consequences of having a book that started out with a particular approach. Otherwise, one completely rewrites, starts again, and writes a very different kind of book.

9. Genre

This topic presupposes that the book fits in with other similar kinds of works with similar concerns or approaches. Obviously the novel is about the human condition in one way or another like all novels. It is about a person who is tested. In this instance it is about history and how moments in history affect individuals and their responses and about their choices in a changing and intense context.

I do think the context for this book is important. The fact is that South Africa and the liberation struggles of the nineteen eighties are more than a backdrop. I specifically want to create some insight into the period and into what people might have faced then.

The second aspect of context for this book is that there is a very specific authorial voice. The position of a white activist is very specific, a voice of someone who identifies with the liberation struggle but does not have any obvious/natural reasons for being driven into his commitments, even if Jeremy is not entirely unique. He has a Jewish immigrant background; he finds it difficult to express himself, so sex, identity (whiteness, gay sex, hard sex, drugs) all occur in repressed ways but still occasionally surfacing.

So the book does reflect on a white activist in a particular period of struggle. It is also written in a post-apartheid setting of some disillusion with government and the achievements of the liberation struggle, as well as a period where literature is seen as having been freed from the stricture of needing to reflect dominant political imperatives.

Yet I am trying to write a post-struggle 'struggle' novel. While I believe it is now possible to write about the personal and while I believe personal issues, motives and ambiguities are important, I still want to recover the effect of that historical period on what happens and is possible today. Thus, while nothing written about human beings can be totally unique, I do think that the concerns of the book are specific.

When I look around, I find it difficult to place this book in a wider stream. I do not know much written about history and seeking to debunk the heroic in the activist. I would not include long historical narratives like Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or even books about the holocaust or struggles with and about Nazism (Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*).

I had originally had Norman Mailer in mind, but his soldier protagonists in *The Naked and the Dead* face a particular wartime situation and are in a different kind of battle; they are also portrayed somewhat in heroic mold.

I know of very little written about white activists. There is some autobiography such as Carl Niehaus' *Om te veg vir hoop* or biography such as Shawn Slovo writing about her parents' involvement (*A World Apart*) that might reflect some of the dilemmas I want to confront. Slovo is personal and honest about the impact of missing her parents while feeling guilt about the importance of their activist and party work. She is thus situated outside the heroic and

unproblematic commitments of Niehaus' book (much autobiography could be seen as ultimately self-serving or 'ego-centric' as André P. Brink puts it).^{xvi}

There are books that are history, context and also autobiography – by Lorna Levy (*Radical Engagements: My Life in Exile*) or Rica Hodgson (*Footsoldier for Freedom*) – that give details of their long history of involvement in the socialist movement especially. The nineteen eighties play little part in their narrative as they were in exile in this period.

There is very little in English written or published on the nineteen eighties, or certainly little on the internal battles or from a perspective situated inside the country that explains what led to political change. Menan du Plessis in *A State of Fear* made a small beginning. Indeed, the popular struggles of the time and wide involvement by civil society are often found in more academic or research-based texts: subordinated to a discourse that focuses on the political party and the ANC (such as Anthea Jeffrey's *Chasing the Rainbow* or *People's War: New light on the struggle for South Africa*, courageous and hyper-critical over-politicised non-fiction) or on the sociological (Jeremy Seekings on the UDF *The UDF: The History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa*).

James Ngculu's autobiographical book on his own journey as an MK operative has some resonances (*The Honour to Serve: Recollections of an Umkhonto Soldier*). Ngculu's book is autobiography (including a history and context) but is also very specific to his involvement in MK. Interestingly, it has been described at its launch recently as

"the first book chronicling the history and people behind the ANC's military wing" (Kasrils) and in one review as "about the pride of the 1976 generation, the appreciation of their personal sacrifice and the ability of the human spirit to adapt to hardship."^{xvii}

And then in the same review in words closer to the concerns of my novel, though still within a discourse of heroic activism:

Thirty-four years after the Soweto uprising, The Honour to Serve helps others to appreciate the pain, suffering, scars, deep bonds, friendships and complex human relationships that come from the harrowing yet fulfilling experience of this generation.

Wally Serote (*To Every Birth its Blood*) has also tried to problematise the role of the activist or operative, but again his book is very specific to MK and to the guerilla camps. Bridget Pitt in *Unbroken Wing* has attempted to deal with a group of white activists, but the book lacks focus and is lengthy without clear narrative or thematic intent.

In short – I hate to say it, and it is certainly not a claim that makes the book as submitted valuable in itself – but I think the combination of an activist who is white, who has complexities and foibles, and who attempts to deal with a particular kind of mass struggle, makes the book one that largely stands on its own.

Perhaps this makes the book too specific and could mean a struggle to pull out really universal themes or to write an integrated and compelling narrative plot.

My claim at the beginning was:

The novel must thus not be narrow or parochial.

It must appeal universally at the same time (through) being very specific^{xviii}

I would like to have the book read in this light.

I do want people to understand the times, to have some sense of what the anti-apartheid struggle meant, to get insights into how it was organised, and to understand the costs and sacrifices this often implied. I want South Africans in particular to understand some of these issues from the perspective of a white activist.

I also want the novel to enrich South Africans' current understandings of what might disillusion them in the present and what might reasonably be expected; and perhaps offer some insight into how they might also act better to change what it is in their surroundings that they dislike, or to understand what is possible in the current very different historical moment.

Beyond that, my contribution is also to say activists were not heroes and had a host of human failings and ambiguities, like all human beings today.

My book is quite short. I do not think there would be much benefit in extending it. There may be too many themes and issues in such a short book that makes it not always clear about the main and primary focus. Perhaps clues are embedded in the text and not picked up and developed with enough consistency. Perhaps the main characters are not developed enough, and the plot is not gripping enough, without a driving narrative. It may also be that the book is also not written as well as it could be, even within the limitations of its own objectives and intentions.

All these are points I could concede.

Nonetheless, I think I have written a book that is interesting. It has enough meat in it to be considered by a reader with a literary interest. To those who still remember the particular period and are interested in the dilemmas and motives of a white activist, the book provides more. There might be interest from many such South Africans of differing or even no political position, and also people in other countries who specifically identified with South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle and allowed it to touch them and evoke some response.

More than that, I would like this book to be read by a new generation of readers. These would especially be new younger black readers who want to know what things were like in those days, who feel curious about (but not indebted to) how the past brought many freedoms that they now enjoy, including the freedom to read literature not tied to narrow political concerns.

It is a book about activism and about how we got to where we are as South Africans, and about the importance of situating human beings in their historical context. I would like some readers from within generations still to come, to be affected by these concerns and to grow as people from reading my novel.

10. Conclusion

This is my best attempt, which achieves certain things that make me happy. It tells a story about which not much has been written. I chose to write it as a fictional piece, as fiction is well suited to bring out, deal with and explore some of the 'human' issues. This enriches understanding of a particular historical period, the importance of history, and the human dilemmas that people face.

I feel ready to put the book 'out there' and thus to hear criticism and response, though I believe that some re-writing is required before publication as a novel.

I do think it can stand on its own feet, as an MA submission and as a text which will have its own life beyond me and my intentions.

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12. Endnotes

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- ⁱ Bloch: 2007b
- ⁱⁱ see Booth: 1983: 20
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bloch: 2007b
- ^{iv} Bloch: 2007a
- ^v Booth: 1983
- ^{vi} see Booth :1983: 71, 83
- ^{vii} Ndebele:1991
- ^{viii} ibid: 10
- ^{ix} ibid: 15
- ^x Bloch:2007a
- ^{xi} see Booth: 1983
- ^{xii} Bloch: 2007b
- ^{xiii} Seekings, J: 2000
- ^{xiv} see Forster, 2005: 73
- ^{xv} Bloch: 2007b
- ^{xvi} Sunday Times July 04 2010

^{xvii} Morudu, Mail & Guardian March 05 2010
^{xviii} Bloch: 2007b