

Doug Holder

The Interview

Errol Lincoln Uys is the author of the novel "Brazil," "Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move in the Great Depression", and many other works. Born in South Africa, Uys has been a journalist, International Editor for Reader's Digest, as well as a salesman, law school dropout, and youthful vagabond. Uys, who was a featured reader in The Somerville News Writers Festival last November (2007), worked with the renowned writer James Michener on his novel about South Africa: "The Covenant." I talked with Uys on my Somerville Community Access TV Show: "Poet to Poet: Writer to Writer."

Doug Holder: The English poet Philip Larkin wrote: "It's very difficult to write about being happy. Very easy to write about being miserable." Yes, despite your hardscrabble background you wrote your first article in the Johannesburg Star: "Happiness Is An Unprejudiced Mind."

Was this hard to write in light of your early life?

Errol Uys: It was fairly difficult growing up in South Africa. I was the only child of divorced parents. I dropped out of law school. I tried to start a business that was a total catastrophe. I was going to make cane furniture of all things. Don't ask why! I used to sell things early on. I sold Hula-Hoops in the streets of Johannesburg. I also sold Teddy Bears. Throughout this time I had always been writing. By this point I had written two unpublished novels. I was living in an apartment that was infested with roaches. So here I was with absolutely nothing. I saw a small ad in the Johannesburg Star that read: "Apply for a job as a journalist." I gave the Star a manuscript I had written. In those days you didn't need a M.A. in Journalism. I was lucky. I got a job at the Star. They sent me to a "cadet" school. This was a fantastic way to learn to be a reporter. While I was waiting to go to school I wrote this article "Happiness Is An Unprejudiced Mind." And I got it published on the editorial page. So that's the way to get started through happiness! But I always have had a real feeling for the underdog.

When I worked for the Star it was during the 1960's, and it was a very volatile time in Johannesburg. It was an exciting time to be writing.

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DH: When you were very young you “hit the road” and hitchhiked around South Africa. Did Kerouac influence you?

EU: No, not really. Later when I wrote, “Riding the Rails,” I had obviously read Kerouac. In those days I was just a 15-year-old kid out to see his country. I have been lucky since then. I have traveled all over the world professionally and personally.

DH: So many writers from Crane to Hemingway have gotten their start as journalists. Is working as a journalist a good training ground to be a writer of fiction and nonfiction?

EU: It is and it isn't. There are two schools of thought. From journalism to nonfiction there should be no drawback. To go to fiction there is something of the muse that might be affected. What you have to keep alive in that transition is spirit. That magic and enthusiasm.

DH: You worked closely with James Michener on one of his sprawling historical novels “The Covenant” You did a huge amount of work: research, editing, and writing. Yet you say he failed to acknowledge you as a coauthor. Why?

EU: I remember I said to Michener when we were working on “The Covenant,” “Hey look, you might want to take a look at this and possibly use it.” He took what I gave him, closed the door, and I heard him type it up.

Someone said he really couldn't acknowledge me on a collaborative level. Publishers back then would not put up with it. On the front page of the book there is an acknowledgement that I read the manuscript over seven times with him for errors. Today there would be no question about a full acknowledgement.

DH: Michener was obviously prolific and famous. Do you think he was a good writer?

EU: He was a brilliant researcher. He was great at blending fact and

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fiction. He criticized my work as being too “novelistic.” To me this is great praise. It is hard to criticize his work. His characters are very different from literary-driven ones. His is a huge tapestry. I feel the characters in my historical novel “Brazil” are more fully fleshed than his.

He has an enormous following. Especially amongst the older generation. Books like “The Source” were highly respected. Today the idea of these huge novels is combated by the Internet, and the byte world. Whether he stands among the literary greats is questionable. Remember though he won the Pulitzer for “South Pacific.” That is a work apart from the rest of his writing.

DH: You authored a book “Brazil” that spawned five centuries and two fictional families. Why would a South African take up a country like Brazil?

EU: After working with Michener I had to do my own historical novel. Having come from South Africa to the United States in the 1970’s when the whole racial thing was exploding, I became interested in comparing the two countries. I wondered how did these two countries develop? How did the racial climate in Brazil become so different from South Africa? Coming to live in America I realized how little people new about Brazil. It was amazing. They are our neighbors to the South.

DH: Tell me how you came to write, “Riding the Rails,” your book about the Great Depression, and the teenagers who hopped boxcars traveling the country looking for work. Was it partially due to your wanderlust as a kid?

EU: Partially. I was doing research on the Great Depression era, when I came across this book by Thomas Minehan. Minehan was a sociologist. Minehan rode the rails with the kids who rode the boxcars. My son and daughter-in-law had just finished film school at N.Y.U. I said the subject would make a great documentary. The essentially filmed the documentary for “The American Experience” on PBS. I wrote the companion volume.

DH: What are you working on now?

EU: I am going to write a book about Boston. It is going to be about Irish immigration in the 1840's. The population of Boston during this period went from 100,000 to 135,000. 35,000 were Irish. Can you imagine what Boston was like? What the waterfront where the Irish lived was like? Thousands and thousands of penniless immigrants came here. Yet writers like Emerson and Thoreau and the rest have barely mentioned them. And when they did in the most stereotypical way. This will be a much smaller and compact novel than "Brazil." I want to examine the relationships between the Irish and the Beacon Hill Protestant elites.

DH: Can you tell me about your trove of Michener papers?

EU: I put all the Michener papers on my website. I want to make sure the papers get to the right places. I kept everything. For some reason something told me to keep all those drafts of the Michener book. They are all in binders.

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