

In creative company

Riana Scheepers's writing course at De Compagnie

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When I drove down the long lane to the main house of the farm De Compagnie, the beauty and tranquillity of the exceedingly neat surroundings convinced me that I have indeed arrived at Wellington's Shangri La for writers and poets - or rather those who dream of becoming creators of publishable prose.

The other nine learners arrived in drips and drabs, clearly bursting to acquire knowledge, but just as clearly quite uncertain of what this knowledge would be. And what the verdict will be concerning their writing abilities. We gathered around in the imposing voorkamer of the old Cape Dutch house, peeking at the study - or is it the dream factory - of the accomplished Dr Riana Scheepers. Many books on shelves that stretch up to the high ceiling, a brace of desks and a couple of paintings pretty much complete the picture. I recognise a Jan Visser - an abstract nude and later learn that the model for this painting is indeed one of my fellow learners, none other than the fascinating Maria with her wayward red locks and disarming way of being offhand and exuberant at the same time. Maria, a painter herself, shares a sensual outlook on literature and creativity with Scheepers, which come as no surprise to me, having met and been thoroughly impressed by the good doctor before.

Riana Scheepers is indeed one of those ladies who seem to light up a room with her mere presence and then bowl you over completely with her sharp intellect and a capacity to express herself in a perfectly rational, but

colourful way. Who better then to have as a mentor for a whole week in this luscious milieu of antiques (hers) and antics (ours) - who indeed?

For the next two days we found ourselves sipping Port or Cognac from a striking array of glasses, each uniquely different in colour, shape and size. We learn about the art of writing short stories and are required to try creating such stories ourselves - as 'home-work' - up to a dozen assignments each day and reading our best efforts to the class at the end of each two hour session.

The first day sped past while I was still looking around for parking space, so to speak. By the second day I felt rather flat, weighed down by the sense of suffering from a kind of none too exotic impotency. My best efforts made no discernable impression, but I decided to stick to my initial strategy of writing spontaneously with the minimum editing. In other words, not trying to make an impression, but rather to be assessed on honest, original work.

By day three, Dr Scheepers informed me that I could make it as a writer of short stories and essays. Apart from one satirical poem, she was not too impressed with my attempts at that particular genre. I also was no serious contender for one of the daily prizes for best work (did not think so myself, but must confess, I rather fancied the beautiful rose that René Greyling, the pick of our bunch, no pun intended, won for her deep, intense poems, heavily laden with raw and cryptic emotion).

However, the constant exercise of one's normally lazy right (side of the) brain made for mostly a euphoric mood while

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at the farm. Sampling the products of De Compagnie in those stunning glasses undoubtedly contributed, but still...

Two of the many high points of this unforgettable week were the sessions in the wine cellar and, with exactly the opposite atmosphere, but equally thrilling, the session under a couple of gnarled oaks in a place so romantic and poetic I visualised a scene from **Alice in Wonderland**.

When the last day (Friday 6 October) arrived like a very unwelcome guest, we were still on a collective high, only occasionally troubled by twinges of sadness. I suppose we all knew that after the farewell banquet, we would be summarily kicked out of this cosy nest of creative interactivity. The question looming large in our still reeling minds were: will we be able to take the next step on our own? And do the Johnnie Walker thing - keep on walking? Walking, writing, and struggling: that seems to be the lonely lot of the artist. We decided to at least counteract this apparently inevitable seclusion from society by forming a support system and even resolved to publish our week's work as a collection of mostly poems, sketches and short stories.

With the scrumptious flavour of Riana and Katryn's waterblommetjies lingering on my utterly bewildered palate, I also linger a while longer with fellow disciples, former opera singer Rianné Potgieter and the enigmatic Maria at the beautifully-restored Jonkershuis just a hundred yards from the main house. We vow to do our best to fan the flame that Riana Scheepers kindled in our bosoms - each will pursue the unspoken Quest: write a novel.

When I finally walk to my car, Riana appears on her stoep. We wave and she turns away, her part of the mission completed.

Whether it was successful will be determined by each of us.

In the interim I salute you nine brave souls, Rianné, René, Maria, Johan, Carien, Wilna, Anita, Helena and Eileen.