

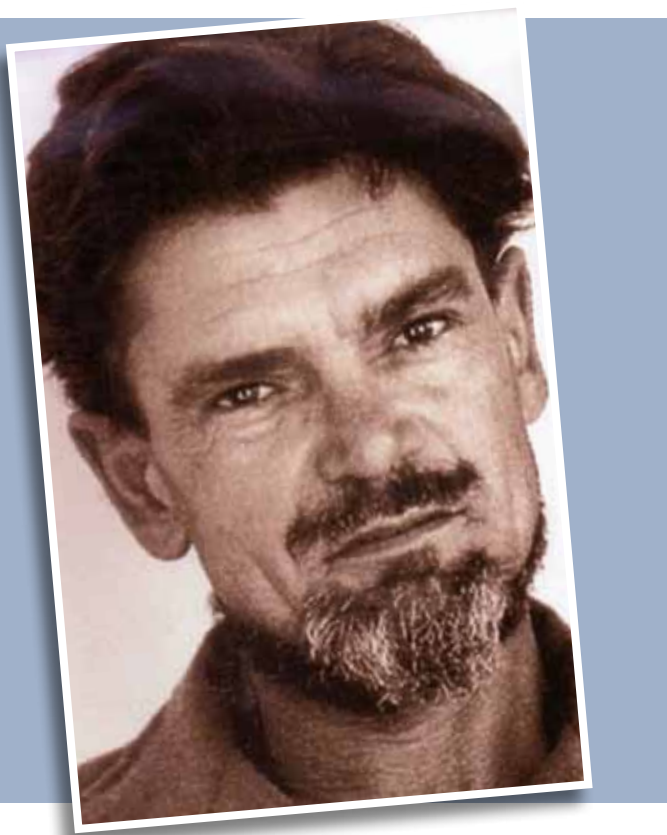
# Jan Rabie (and Jorie)

## at the Woordfees

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**O**n the 2012 Woordfees programme: 'The Manuscripts Section of the Library and Information Service presents its third lecture, "Immergroen: Jan Rabie", on Friday 2 March 2012 during the



Woordfees. Abraham H de Vries and Dave Pepler talk about the life and work of Jan Rabie, one of our best-loved Afrikaans writers. Unique items in the Jan Rabie manuscript collection in the Manuscripts Section will also be showcased.'

The Powerpoint program shifts faded grey images across the huge screen in the dimly lit auditorium as shadowy figures slowly file up, up, into the artificial dusk, and finally to their seats. Outside, among the JS Gericke Library's shelves, well-known Afrikaans writer Prof Abraham de Vries is seen talking to another familiar figure, the environmental activist and TV-personality Dave Pepler.

They enter last and start chatting about their initial encounters with Jan (Sebastian) Rabie, the famous *Sestiger* writer. Rabie was eccentric – called 'the original hippie', and someone who was strongly rooted in the earth: he lived from the sea and their little garden behind the house he shared with Marjorie Wallace, Scottish-born painter, nicknamed Jorie. And this set the trend of the 'discussion', as these kind of informal lectures are generally known.

The theme of the 2012 Woordfees was *Groen* (Green) and aptly most of the themes touched upon were linked to connectivity with nature. The Rabies were indeed 'natuurkinders', always footloose and fancy free; they really lived their love for nature – never, if they could help it, did they sleep indoors, sometimes in ditches next to roads. Pepler mentioned that when Rabie lived in Paris (1948-1955), he sometimes only had potato peelings or cabbage leaves to eat; the bare minimum to exist (true, he could not afford anything 'better', if 'better' was what he was craving for), and after he had hooked up with Wallace, they lived in Crete, where they learned to live off the land.

The Rabies (they got married in 1955, shortly before Jan returned to South Africa, with Marjorie following soon after) lived with the painters Erik Laubscher and his wife, Claude Bouscharain, in Green Point, where, despite the scrutiny of the security police, infamous parties with artists and writers across the racial boundaries of yesteryear were held. They then visited the United States, returned and bought a house at

Onrusrivier, where they lived out their lives: (Jan died in 2001, Marjorie in 2005) and there they were again known for their peculiar lifestyle: sleeping on the stoep, supposedly only taking baths once a year and having little to do with hygiene in any form or fashion.

The abovementioned potpourri of facts and myths are well-known among lovers of Afrikaans literature, but De Vries and Pepler obviously enjoyed retelling this as well as some personal experiences with the Rabies, and other members of their circle of friends – Uys Krige's name came up frequently, as could be expected, as well as Etienne Leroux, Jack Cope, Koos Human, Bartho Smit (father of the *Sestiger*-movement) and Breyten Breytenbach.

A few passages were read from some of Rabie's works and special mention was made of his greatest book, the collection of short stories titled **21**. This little book, hailed as one of the most significant works in Afrikaans, was first published in 1956, again in 1961, and in 2000 with additions (re-titled as **21+**). Two slightly worse for wear copies were on sale with many other Rabie works after the discussion, but those present seemed to be unaware of the significance of these rare Africana items.

As for the discussion, I felt it was decidedly unstructured, with De Vries announcing that 'it would be wrong to deliver a lecture on Rabie', so perhaps they wanted to convey the very naturalness and the aversion to conformity of Jan and Jorie – even though the title of the talk indicated that this lecture would be about Jan Rabie, he was incomplete without his Jorie. De Vries stretched the point that Rabie was the greatest 'taalpatriot' (really a language activist) he had ever known. Still,

he married a Scot, had friends of many nationalities, enjoyed learning new languages, starting with French upon arrival in France, with a dictionary and a newspaper. Three weeks later he could help himself. Later he learnt Greek and Italian as well and he often wrote stories in English for the benefit of his non-Afrikaans friends. It has to be said that Marjorie learned Afrikaans too – at her last exhibition at the Sasol Art Museum in Stellenbosch I heard her quip André P. Brink: 'André, jy praat nog net so baie k... soos altyd!'

Some of Rabie's English versions of his short stories (he translated them into Afrikaans) were the additions mentioned above in 2000 in **21+**; namely 13 original

English stories: **21+** thus equates to 34 stories. In this way Brink, who edited the collection, provided readers with the unique opportunity for comparison. According to De Vries, Rabie wrote stop-start and with a lot of fluff in between – brilliant passages between mediocre ones – like exclusive jewels wrapped in second-hand cotton wool, all in the same inventory. He was hard-headed and loved his attempts at wordsmithing, even when not up to scratch:

he lacked the ability to edit objectively. Too bad Marjorie's Afrikaans was not that good!

Not much of Rabie's oeuvre was discussed, but it was mentioned that he wrote early 'green' books in Afrikaans, like **Die groen planeet (The green planet, 1961)** and **Die seeboek van die sonderkossers (Sea fare for the foodless, 1975)**. Rabie was an environmentalist and a great deal can be learned from his teachings – he saw himself as an educator, and practised what he preached on the subject. Once a teacher, always a teacher – he taught school before the epic move to Paris.

Some interesting context was provided by De Vries – he said that approaching the Sixties most authors fled to the platteland, meaning that they shied away from political issues and rather reminisced about 'the good ol' days on the farm'. His opinion that nothing had been told of the world of the *Sestigers* struck me as odd, as the late Prof J.C. Kannemeyer wrote excellent biographies of *Sestigers* like Etienne Leroux, Uys Krige and Jan Rabie, and many articles about them can be found in newspapers and academic journals. Brink's **A fork in the road (2009)** also provides a lot of background data on the merry band of authors who tried to expand their own boundaries while endeavouring to explore and explode the membranes of cultural dogma. Surely there can never be too much written about their individual and collective efforts, and perhaps this is what De Vries meant.

As for Rabie, he was described as a hippie: no-nonsense, simple in outlook and practices, and straightforward; a genuine person, full of passion, with real love for this country and all Afrikaans speakers. He did harbour a great rage against injustice, stupidity and bigotry and this resentment was evident in his work. According to De Vries, Rabie was hampered by his obsession with politics and his 'hiccuppy' way of writing. Whilst Rabie was a prolific analyst of anything he encountered (he thought and wrote in depth about the arts, philosophy, psychology and politics in his diaries),... his burning drive to 'write things right' proved to be a ball and chain which prevented him to reach his potential.

Rabie was always arguing with fellow authors like Etienne Leroux to engage in politics (Leroux refused), invariably at odds with those who were prepared to accept the status quo, and ultimately being buffeted

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by the whirlwind created by his political activism. But **21** is undeniably the title that made for Jan Rabie the book often referred to as a watershed in Afrikaans literature. According to André P Brink it also 'changed the path of Afrikaans literature and sent ripples through Afrikaans culture'. And, Brink wrote, 'this phenomenon is built upon an astounding irony: that Rabie's work was originally written in English and had only been translated into Afrikaans later'.

The book **21** was something of a guide to new directions in Afrikaans literature and therefore an important work. And **21+** is important because of the insight it provides into the makings of **21** as far as the language matter is concerned. But there is another book, also edited by André Brink, which deserves to be studied: **Paryse dagboek (The Paris diaries)**, published in 1998. I read this book recently and was greatly impressed with Rabie's intellect and insight in humanity – even though he frequently denied this!

**Paryse dagboek** consists of excerpts from Rabie's original diaries which he kept while in Europe. Brink concentrated on the time Rabie stayed in Paris and subsequently cut out most of the segments written in Crete, Italy, et cetera. Brink also added some information which he deemed important. This book is extremely insightful to Rabie's thought processes and creative development, and sheds light on the original diaries (exhibited in the Document Centre of the JS Gerike Library, Stellenbosch University, Rabie's alma mater).

So, while the anecdotes and humorous references to the Rabie duo were entertaining, I was hoping to learn more about the enigma that was Jan Rabie. Apart from some fleeting flashes, glimpses of the inimitable personality that appeared and disappeared again and again on the large screen, I still really only know of Jan Rabie what I had read about him. And mostly *by* him.

I suppose that is the best way to get to know an author:

#### List of titles

##### *Prose: novels*

- \* 1943 **Nog skyn die sterre.**- Nasionale Pers.
- \* 1944 **Geen somer.**- Nasionale Pers.
- \* 1946 **Vertrou op môre.**- Afrikaanse Pers.
- \* 1947 **Die pad na mekaar.**- Afrikaanse Pers.
- 1957 **Ons, die afgod.**- AA Balkema.
- 1963 **Mens-alleen.**- Afrikaanse Pers.
- 1981 **Johanna se storie.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1982 **'n Boek vir Onrus.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1989 **Buidel.**- Human & Rousseau.

##### *Bolandia series 1-5*

- 1964 **Eiland voor Afrika.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1964 **Die groot anders-maak.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1966 **Waar jy sterwe.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1977 **Ark.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1985 **En oseaan.**- Human & Rousseau.

##### *Prose: short stories*

- 1956 **Een-en-twintig.**- AA Balkema.
- 1957 **Dakkamer en agterplaas.**- AA Balkema.
- 1966 **Die roos aan die pels.**- John Malherbe.
- 1980 **Versamelerhale.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 2000 **Een-en-twintig plus.**- Human & Rousseau.

##### *Prose: science fiction*

- 1957 **Swart ster oor die Karoo.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1961 **Die groen planeet.**- AA Balkema.
- 1971 **Die hemelblom.**- Tafelberg.

##### *Prose: youth novels*

- 1960 **Twee strandlopers.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 1975 **Die seeboek van die sonderkossers.**- Tafelberg.

##### *Diary*

- 1998 **Paryse dagboek.**- Human & Rousseau.

##### *Essays*

- \* 1960 **Die evolusie van nasionalisme.**- Mishoring-pers.
- \* 1965 **Rooi.**- John Malherbe.
- \* 1966 **Polemika (1957-1965).**- John Malherbe.

##### *Travel*

- 1970 **Klipwieg.**- Human & Rousseau.
- 2004 **Hutspot.**- Protea Boekhuis.

##### *Translations*

- 1966 **Waar jy sterwe**

##### *English*

- 1969 **A man apart**

##### *Biography*

In 2004 the 532-page biography, **Jan Rabie**, by JC Kannemeyer was published by Tafelberg Publishers.

\* *Not in Library Service stock.*

## Short cuts

- ▶ Jan Sebastian Rabie (14 November 1920 – 15 November 2001) was born in George, and grew up in the Riversdale district. He was included in the *Sestigers*, a group of influential Afrikaans writers of the 1960s. (Wikipedia)
- ▶ Jan and Marjorie's house in Onrus was a place where writers and poets such as Uys Krige, Etienne Leroux, André P Brink, Ingrid Jonker, Breyten Breytenbach, Elsa Joubert and Jack Cope would gather; visit and spend hours in intellectual debate.
- ▶ Rabie translated more than 40 books, mainly from the French. These included **L'Étranger** by Albert Camus into **Die buitestaander**.
- ▶ In Paris he befriended various Dutch writers and notables such as Pierre Corneille, Christiaan Karel Appel, Hugo Claus, Bert Schierbeek, Lucebert, Simon Vinkenoog and Rudy Kousbroeck.
- ▶ In 1990 the film director Katinka Heyns made a documentary, **Jan-en-Jorie**, in celebration of Jan's 70th birthday.
- ▶ In 2004 the playwright Malan Steyn wrote a play titled **Jan en Jorie**. Actress Nicole Holm was awarded a Fleur du Cap for her portrayal of Marjorie. (Human & Rousseau Publishers)
- ▶ **Awards**  
Scheepers Prize for Youth Novels (1977) – **Die seeboek van die sonderkossers**  
Honorary Doctorate from the University of the Orange Free State (1990).