"A richly varied tribute . . . some true gems to be found."
— JM Coetzee

A WRITER IN STONE

SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS CELEBRATE THE 70TH BIRTHDAY OF LIONEL ABRAHAMS

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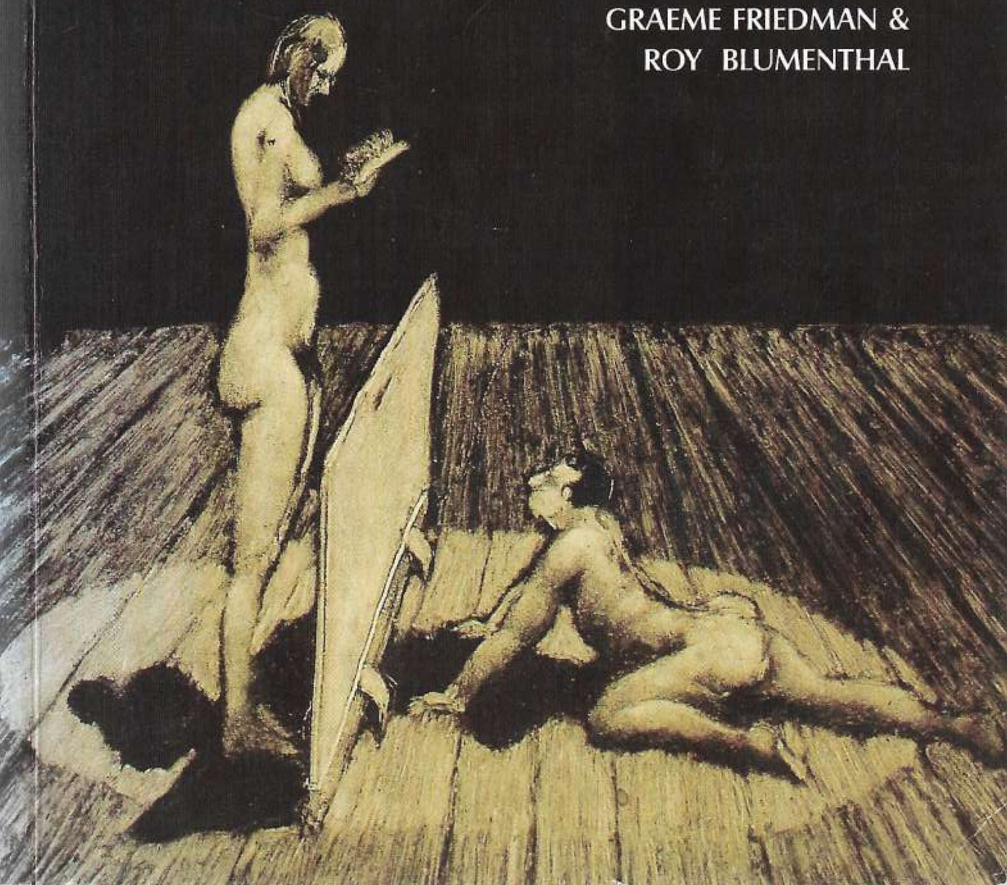

MARK GEVISSER

a profile of Lionel Abrahams

NO SPECIAL CASES

There is something transformative about a first encounter with Lionel Abrahams. At the outset, it is hard not to be overwhelmed by his extreme physical dysfunction: even the slightest manipulations – the scratching of a forehead, the minuscule movements required to shift his mechanized wheelchair, the enunciation of a response – require such effort that you are not sure how he will make it through the interview. You struggle to understand; you are frequently thrown off the course of an idea by his contortions.

But ineluctably, the dynamics begin to change. It's not just that you begin to become more familiar with his lexicon of staccato gestures, facial grimaces and slurred vowel-sounds. It's that he entices you so fully, through his communicative powers, into the world of his intellect, his book-filled study, that you buy into its own set of coordinates: before you know it, he has extended the walls of his world to encompass you. A few hours later (it's never less than a few hours), you go back out into the ambulatory workaday world and realize that it, rather than Lionel Abrahams, is different, strangely deficient. And you're incomparably richer for the insights you have just gained.

A student of Abrahams explains his potency thus: "His mind is so powerful, that he is able to use it to make you forget how useless his body is." After a few hours with him, I felt the relationship between his body and his mind to be, in a way, less complicated. He was born with a severe neurological condition, a type of palsy known as 'Jewish Tortion Dystonia'. But unlike many disabled people, he does not attempt to perform the impossible conjuring trick of pretending his body isn't there. It *is* there, in a very matter-of-fact, unprecious, and unself-pitying way. Sometimes it needs help, other times it will manage fine by itself, as long as you exercise a bit of patience.

In *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan*, Abrahams's compelling autobio-

graphical novel, the disabled young protagonist is seduced by the notion, supplied to him by a master at the home he lives in, that he can put 'Mind over Matter'. So entirely does Felix embrace his master's mystical, proto-Louise-Hayes-ish notions of 'the power of positive thinking' that he stops himself just moments before trying to swim across a dam – a test that would surely have killed him.

Felix's next mentor, based strongly on the character of Herman Charles Bosman (who was to exert a profound influence on Abrahams's life as his creative writing teacher) gives him the far more workable idea that he can move toward the achievement of creative – and physical – potency through willing his mind to engage with matter, with the world, rather than forcing it, impossibly, to transcend it.

In a poem called 'Meditation with a Cat', Abrahams describes, with loving precision, the movements of the animal: 'She unfolds her curious elastic ease/ through the rich space of the room,/ tensed by suspicion,/ sprung by the cunning lust to kill,/ testing the limits of the moment . . .' And then, a whiplash turnaround: '. . . the moment she, after all, is gaoled in.' Gaoled, because 'her motions, her motives/ are less hers/ than mine./ Perception and concept and design/ are the space wherein I'm free.'

It's the expression of an intense, almost swaggering poetic bravado: the cat only moves, dear reader, because I make her move for you. She is sensation alone, mechanical, gaoled by my plans for her, by the moment of the poem. I might not be able to move my own body, but I can perceive and conceive and design *her* movement – and that's how *I* can be free. Somewhat reminiscent of Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli'.

How well Abrahams understands the power of 'Mind over Matter'. But his triumph is in how fully he took Bosman's lessons to heart, in that he has put his difficult body so successfully into the world. He has single-mindedly gone about accumulating the experience he requires as writer – from eating fruit to travelling the world to having sex to engaging with politics and with the city he lives in – as if there were not so strong a barrier in his way. He has not retreated into cerebral celibacy. In fact, it is hard not to be struck by just how physically charged he is: he glows.

Certainly, a lot of his poetry is cerebral or polemical, but much else is devoted to sensuality and sentiment. His love-poems to his wife Jane Fox are, to my mind, among the best of that genre written in South Africa – I'd rank them up there with those of his arch-adversary in the cultural wars, Jeremy Cronin. Both, for all their polemical soapboxing, can write about love, and sex, in a way that gives flesh to

Abrahams's defining credo: that interpersonal relationships, rather than political processes, have the power to change the world.

Unlike the South African 'greats' who have made it into the planetary canon – Gordimer, Coetzee, Fugard – Abrahams's own literary output has been slender: four volumes of poetry, one novel. In fact, he published his first book only when he was fifty. Perhaps, he volunteers with a chuckle, this is because he hasn't been "ruthless" enough in protecting his own time. The result: his influence, as a publisher, teacher, editor and proponent of South African literature has been profound.

He is that rare thing indeed in South African culture: a literary figure as much as he is a littérateur. He has a generous knack for immortalising his mentors: he is significantly responsible for the popular revival of Herman Charles Bosman, and he spent years arranging publication for a comprehensive collection of the poetry of his other great teacher, Ruth Miller. His literary magazine, *The Purple Renoster*, defined both quality and vanguardism in South African literature through the 1960s. His publication, in the early 70s, of the first, soul-searing volumes of poetry by Oswald Mtshali and Wally Serote are among the most significant milestones in the development of contemporary South African literature. As this very anthology testifies, his career has touched almost every single significant South African writer of the past half-century, from Guy Butler to Zacharia Rapola.

We sit now, on the eve of his seventieth birthday, in the study of the rambling old Rivonia farmhouse he shares with Jane, to whom he has been married for the last fifteen years. She too is a writer – she assisted him in the editing of his literary magazine, *Sesame*, and she is a regular in his Monday night writing workshops. Abrahams does not hide the scars of a difficult life, but now there is something quite comfortable, almost sated, in his manner. His home with Jane is *gemütlich*, easy with itself. It has, about it, neither the self-conscious clutter that proclaims 'intellectual' nor the self-conscious aestheticism that proclaims 'connoisseur'.

I ask him what it was about Bosman's ideas that gave him so compelling an antidote to the 'Mind over Matter' credo supplied by his first mentor. "What was it?" he echoes, in his manner of repeating a question so that he can turn it inside-out, as if to expose its less immediately apparent implications to the light of day. "What was it? It had to do with his vision of art, art in the world, and one's possible relation to art. It had to do with connection, art as means of entering into

a relationship with strangers, across space and across time . . ."

There is a mysticism to this response, a lack of the usual cloudless acuity, that points to the effect Bosman had on his young protégé, an effect so profound that language eludes him when he tries to explain Bosman's role in his life. Even Abrahams, for whom language is reason itself, must concede that there are certain topics – salvation, for one – that are mercifully beyond its grasp.

Above Abrahams's desk is a huge blow-up of a newspaper photo of his mentor. A jaunty Bosman strides down a Johannesburg street with a woman on each arm above the caption, 'Herman Charles Bosman with his two wives.' Abrahams obviously loves the raffish boulevardier in Bosman, loves the mischief-maker and the dissident, and has modelled for himself a similar role in literary society. Bosman remains his guide in many ways – from the importance of having a sense of 'place' in Johannesburg, to the notion, that Abrahams often expounds, of 'aesthetic patriotism', a belief in rigorous standards that would enable an indigenous South African literature to become world-class.

When Abrahams published his first short story in *Trek* in the late 1940s, Bosman (who incidentally was *Trek's* literary editor) wrote him a letter, congratulating him as 'the Pauline Smith of Johannesburg'. "By that," Abrahams explains, "he was pointing to my particular identification with a locality."

No South African writer's identification with this city is stronger. "He was the pivot," says writer and critic Stephen Gray, "of a glorious school of Johannesburg writing that took hold around him in the 1960s; people like Lionel and Barney Simon were pioneers of the Golden City vernacular; theirs was a gritty suburban realism."

When I read Abrahams's writings about the city into which I was born – the Jewish Johannesburg of the 60s – I feel an almost inexplicable longing for a place I never knew. Part of this is because I have always felt that I was born into an environment that was shutting down, closing up, after the effusion of the 50s, due to the stranglehold of Verwoerdian apartheid. Abrahams – perhaps because of his idiosyncratic relationship to politics – has shown me another side: he writes approvingly of how his friend the poet David Wright saw the Johannesburg of the 60s, 'with its new publishers, new theatres, new literary magazines, new sorts of encounters between white and newly visible black writers resulting in new possibilities and perplexities [as] something of a vibrant centre.'

But Abrahams's writing about my home town provokes in me so

intense a longing primarily because of something more profound: his acute understanding of how this perpetually self-imploding, self-reinventing city of ours relates to memory and amnesia. This is an understanding enhanced, no doubt, by the ironic fact that his father was a demolition contractor responsible for pulling down much of Johannesburg's history: 'Memory', he writes in his magnificent 'The Fall of van Eck House', 'takes root only half in the folds of the brain: / half's in the concrete streets we have lived along. / Implosion, abrupt negation, amputates flesh of dreams. / van Eck House – I'd hardly been aware / it bore this newer name: of I.'

There is, says his old friend and editor, Patrick Cullinan, a core of mischief to Abrahams's personality. "When I first met Lionel, I'd find it difficult to be in public with him. I'd always feel so bad for him. But then Barney Simon [one of Abrahams's closest friends] said something to me I have never forgotten: 'Don't ever forget that Lionel is the one who is amused. He's looking, and laughing at them a lot harder than they're laughing at him.'"

In *Celibacy*, the young Felix overcomes the terrible ostracism he experiences at the home (not least for being a smart-alecky Jewboy in a very Afrikaans environment during the war years) by inventing the character of Professor Mac-U-Laff, a stand-up comic routine in which Felix 'makes you laff', gets the other kids slapping their sides by parodying himself and playing the court jester.

Abrahams the chortling jester – which is how his friends know him: head thrown back in gleeful mirth – is not a figure with which the public is familiar. He has taken on, in the literary world, a perhaps more difficult persona, one of a self-confessed curmudgeon; the cranky old liberal firing fusillades against a New Order in which language and reason and standards are under perpetual threat. But this, believes Cullinan, also has a fair dollop of self-parody in it. "Sometimes," he says, "it's as if Lionel is playing it up a little bit, the elderly man of letters tut-tutting."

"Let's put it this way," says Jane Fox. "Lionel has no problem being combative. He'll fight for something he believes in. 'Letting off his popgun,' he calls it."

Here, for example, is Abrahams in the mid-80s, decrying the 'death' of English: 'As we rush toward [the new dispensation], the anticipatory excitement in many takes the form of an appetite for demolition. The coming new man is not allowed to have anything in common with us, is not conceived of as having any use for our proven values

and proven structures. Out they must go! Down they must go! Épater les bourgeois! Whee! I believe this negative radicalism is strictly limited in its thinking and promises us a dull, impoverished mental world with less language and therefore less freedom than ever.'

Ten years later, does he feel this prophecy to be accurate? "It's not as bad as all that," he chuckles. "Perhaps I wouldn't put it so strongly. There are a number of people holding on to what is right." The laughter stops. He is dead-serious now. "But I'm far from altogether happy. In the field of language and literature, authority has become very timid. One of the swearwords of the day is prescriptiveness, and as a result linguistic imprecision is not so much tolerated as embraced as the norm."

With this he launches into a tirade against the use of expressions such as 'job situation' rather than 'job', 'problem area' rather than 'problem', 'life-styles' rather than 'life', 'intelligence levels' rather than 'intelligence'. "To me it suggests that among the movers and makers, there is a defensiveness, a preference for vagueness, to obfuscate the fact that they can't deliver on promises."

This is classic, curmudgeonly Abrahams. I too am irritated by the reign of jargonish sociospeak over governance. But if a bit of linguistic sloppiness is the by-product of democracy, as opposed to the extreme linguistic precision of apartheid with its taxonomy of rules and fixed locations, then I'll put up with it. Why can't Abrahams?

"He has become," explains his friend, the writer Peter Wilhelm, "something of an icon of classic liberalism. What seems to annoy him more than anything else is the breakdown of language, which he sees as the breakdown of rationalism, because he identifies the coherent use of language with the power of reason itself. Bad art or bad language, in that light, represents bad thinking, and out of bad thinking you get social dislocation, random murders, genocide. . ."

Part of what appears, incorrectly, to be orneriness stems from a distaste for anything faddish or fashionable. One of his oldest friends, the writer Rose Moss, remembers that, at Wits University in the 1950s, "people would go off to the Treason Trial to see what was happening, but Lionel would have nothing to do with it. In fact he was disdainful of it. His sense was that a lot of people were being opportunistic; they were interested in showing their moral superiority, not in public action rooted in their own experience."

This anti-faddishness sometimes seems to lead Abrahams to throw the baby of a just cause out with the bathwater of its less virtuous proponents; another example of this is his almost bilious dislike of literary theory, which he believes constitutes – along with political correctness – the very direst threat to art.

Ask Abrahams who impresses him in contemporary South African literature and he'll respond, "Coetzee, Coetzee, Coetzee, both in fiction and in criticism." JM Coetzee returns the compliment: "Lionel Abrahams has been a reliable and fairly rocklike presence on the South African critical/reviewing scene for a couple of decades. He is an old-fashioned critic of the FR Leavis or Lionel Trilling type, but there's nothing wrong with that. He is an acute reader, with generous sympathies – an unusual combination."

Abrahams's critical perspective combines a transcendental mysticism about art received from Eliot via Bosman ('between us [the reader and the poet], by some damned miracle,/ the poem takes place') with a staunch positivism that embraces set standards and values and decries the relativism of cultural studies. 'Ironically,' he has written, 'in dismissing the received standards of literary excellence as merely a Eurocentric cultural convention, [. . .] white critics [of the left] were in effect saying to the black newcomers to the disciplines of print: "The best is not expected of you; the best is not for your enjoyment." '

This is why he refused to class the 'ritualized slogans, jeers and exhortations' of oral struggle-verse as 'poetry', why he wrote, about *Staffrider*, that 'I began to find the magazine largely unreadable. Its openness was of a different sort from what the first issue had led me to expect. It was open to expressions of the people's voice to the extent that other voices seemed to be crowded out. What to me was so disappointing in the populist utterance is that it drew so little on actual experience and so much on politically sanctioned, flattened, smoothed and simplified notions of what experience was supposed to be. The tone was shrill but the content often had the paradoxical blandness of stereotype and cliché.'

Abrahams struggles, perpetually, with how to be an 'individualist' voice in 'collectivist' Africa. 'How', he asks in a recent column in *Sidelines*, 'am I to proceed with my life as a South African if, for instance, individualism and "western" logic are somehow inherently wrong, at any rate un-African?'

He mistrusts politics precisely because of its 'flattening' collectivity. "I'm no kind of political activist," he tells me. "I'm no kind of political apologist. I don't bend my abilities to anybody's purpose. I don't let anyone engage me. Which is not to say," he adds with a characteristic undercutting smile (a physical signification of ambivalence and contradiction one does not often pick up in his polemical writing), "that I

can't be seduced!"

He is inherently conservative. He was only really roused into rage at the excesses of Verwoerdian apartheid when the government passed its infamous 'gagging' clause, silencing 102 writers – many of whom were not even communists – in 1966. He wrote in his diary (published later in Patrick Cullinan's collection, *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader*) at the time: 'My willingness to trust the Nationalists' fundamental good intentions in a situation of extraordinary complexity, my desire to see them given a chance to put their solution to the test, are knocked awry by this reminder that they go in abject terror of the mere words of their critics. [. . .] Perhaps the militant liberals are right. Perhaps it has to be war . . .'

When they were at university, says Rose Moss, "Lionel just didn't believe that politics was that important, because of his credo about literature, which is that you solve things through personal interaction. He saw communication through literature as the medium through which good things happen; not politics."

Because of this overarching credo, Abrahams was initially optimistic, in the late 1970s, about the formation of PEN (Johannesburg), a meeting place of writers that worked as a sort of encounter-group across the races and organized township poetry readings. He joined PEN and was elected onto its large executive committee.

But his political coming of age – and his ultimate, rather bitter, fall from innocence – was the fractious dissolution of the organization a few years later. He experienced – and articulated publicly – a sense of dismay when black writers, supported by white leftists in a dilemma, insisted on closing up shop because political imperatives made it difficult for them to continue working with some whites while there was a struggle to be waged against others.

One of Abrahams's major involvements was the editing of Modikwe Dikobe's rough diamond of a novel, *The Marabi Dance*, a project that took the better part of a decade. He was accused of interfering unduly, as editor, with Dikobe's own writing and sensibilities. The issue raises all the most complicated questions about race and patronage in South Africa. Abrahams rejects the accusation out of hand: "It was as though," he told me once, "it was a dirty window we cleaned up a bit. We might have replaced a pane or two, but we did not ever interfere with the author's intention. Every single idea in the book is his and his alone."

Njabulo Ndebele is one of the black writers with whom Abrahams clashed in those years – although the two have always had a strong

mutual respect. "I have been," says Ndebele now, "impressed by one thing in Lionel Abrahams: the consistent thread, in his thinking, of the importance of the humanizing values of literature, and that these values can only be achieved through a rigorous attention to the exacting demands of making art. To many on the left, such a position elicited a great deal of impatience. Lionel's positions may be irritating, but impossible to ignore, and you grudgingly accede to them!"

Ndebele offers himself as an example: "As a young man I submitted a poem to him for publication, and he rejected it, because he didn't think it was good enough. I was outraged! And I penned a longwinded response, deploying politics and social context in my defence. Now, of course, I see that Lionel represents an abiding core of value which one appreciates – about innovation, about being skilled, about putting stress on learning and excellence. I see that he is a symbol of lasting value, and I appreciate the courage with which he took those positions when it was difficult to take them."

Nonetheless, Ndebele feels that there is also "a core of innocence, a certain lack of understanding" in Abrahams's positions: "Man, how could someone not understand that the poetry of wild gesture and stance-taking in the 70s and 80s was imperative?"

In perhaps his most compelling articulation of the liberal position in post-apartheid South Africa – the 1995 Hoernlé Memorial Lecture he delivered to the SA Institute of Race Relations – Abrahams makes a distinction between the Jeremiahs of South African literature, 'dominated by an idea of South Africa in a state of political and moral sickness' (Gordimer, Fugard, Brink, Coetzee, Ndebele, Breytenbach, Hope), and the Isaiahs, whose 'visionary patriotism [. . .] inspire[s] transformation, growth, flight' (Paton, Small, Mphahlele, Schreiner, Smuts).

At the end of the lecture he recites his familiar litany of the decline of our civilization: 'We are living in an avalanche of change. Many of the changes cause me pain. The order of my world is threatened. Security, convenience and pleasantness are less to be counted on. I have to witness insulting, wasteful, self-destructive savagery, and remind myself that trash on the streets is less terrible than blood on the streets [. . .] I have to wait while the exasperated, the disappointed, the misled try their hand at fulfilling the symbolism of President Mandela's inauguration by overhauling everything – even the hospitals that succour their own people, even the museums, libraries and universities that give the nation some means of mastery over time and brute circumstance – remaking all in the image of Africa.'

Jeremiad though this may sound, he lands up identifying himself, unexpectedly, with Isaiah: 'Sorrowfully, critically, but without paralyzing anger, fear or disgust, I have to endure and survive all this – in the words of Isaiah, to hide myself "as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast" – if I am to embrace our African destiny.' Abrahams occupies a unique position in South African intellectual consciousness: he holds within him both the exuberant Isaiad hope of a Bosman and the measured Jeremiad scepticism of a Coetzee.

There is a clue, perhaps, to Abrahams's polemical intolerance of any position other than one that adheres to cast-iron standards of aesthetic value, in something else he said when delivering that Hoernlé Lecture: he made what he called the 'brutal but necessary remark' that, 'in the arts, as I see it, the deserving case – the poor widow, the paralyzed beggar, the child of the oppressed, the hero of the struggle, the survivor of genocide – has no special claim. Genius, talent, meaningful accomplishment, the aesthetic transmutation of experience, are the only justifications.'

To many, Abrahams would seem, by virtue of his physical incapacity, just such a 'deserving case'. And yet he has made it, as a writer, through no special privileges, no affirmative action, but by dint of his own talent, hard work and perseverance. There's more than a little of a 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' intonation to his polemic.

'My Skin . . .', writes Abrahams in a recent poem called 'Flesh', '. . . is no safe place./ The walls of my house contain/ sufficient travail,/ the floor lies ready to bruise me,/ beat out my breath. Health, safety,/ time for work are not vouchsafed./ I must carve them out of each slippery/ hard-textured day, must grapple/ with the knotted minutes for those luxuries:/ my bare subsistence, a glint of meaning./ This is why, for all I have heard,/ I remain, you could say, aloof;/ in practical terms, you could say,/ ignorant of the struggle.'

It's hard to take Abrahams's protestations of disengagement – of 'ignorance' and 'aloofness' – seriously. His friend, the writer Ivan Vladislavić sees him as "the model of a literary life, precisely because he represents the possibility of a life in books, without withdrawing from the world. He insists on a public life."

As Abrahams puts it, his "thoroughgoing honesty" (in one poem he parodies himself as 'honest Abe whoring with facts') impels him to lay bare the contradictory tensions of his life and work: the tension between the self-involvement he requires to keep his own house – the house of his body – intact, and the public engagement he needs to exercise his credo of communication; the tension between cast-iron aesthetic and moral values, and the more shifting exigencies of life and politics; the tension between the attraction of putting 'Mind over Matter' and the realization that he must engage with 'Matter' if he is to write.

In person, he is very comfortable with the irreconcilability of these tensions, and with the articulation of self-doubts. Unprompted, he itemizes these for me: that he is a bad liberal because he is impatient and intolerant, that he has not read enough, that "there are times when I talk as though I know, even when I don't", that he is not always "brave enough" to possess the "thoroughgoing honesty" so central to his beliefs.

I am astonished when he goes on to tell me, following the Monday night writing workshop I attended, that he fears he performed only at around 35 per cent. "Oh come on Lionel," Jane interjects. "I think you're being hard on yourself! I'd put it at 45 per cent." I sat through the four-hour session, somewhat agape, watching a performance that I would have put somewhere up around 100 per cent. His criticism was unerringly accurate, and almost aphoristic in its acuteness. Most remarkable was to see, in practice, what I had often been told of – his ability to understand the writer's intention and to help the writer achieve this intention, even when he's not always in sympathy with it.

On the Monday night I attended, twenty or so people clustered, in pools of lamplight, around a long table in the Abrahams's living-room. They ranged in age from early 20s to 70s, and took turns to read their offerings, in prose or verse. "Delicious!" one older woman said after someone's recital of a poem – and the gathering around a dining-table did make it seem, at times, like a feast of language; a careful feast, for Abrahams is no voluptuary, and the environment he engenders is more workmanlike than precious.

Abrahams encourages people to write from their own experience, and although this is the most helpful way to teach the craft, it does sometimes result in a walled-in generic suburbia that seems to be floating atop, rather than engaging with, the kind of South African experience about which Bosman was so passionate. This can be seen most clearly in *Sesame*, which, despite being a child of the turbulent 1980s, is devoid of the formal and spiritual adventure of *The Purple Renoster* that preceded it. If this is true, Abrahams allows, perhaps it is because *Sesame* was receptive to the kind of individualistic approach to writing that more boisterous publications, like *Staffrider*, eschewed.

At the workshop I attended there were only two contributions

which so much as nodded at the transition we are living through. There was, though, mercifully little of the pseudo-therapy that plagues writing workshops and specifically autobiographical work, and although there was some platitudinous affirmation, there was just as much bracing, on-the-ball critical comment: Abrahams has encouraged a culture of honest generosity. Some students take much pleasure in sparring with him, as does he with them. Others hang on his every word, beaming in his beneficence, or even his opprobrium. "Thankyou! Thankyou!" said one, after he had cut her to ribbons.

On guruness, Lionel Abrahams has this to say: "I have been presented as an establishment figure, as though I were part of an important institution. In a way I wish I were. I'd be better off than I am now. I'm usually aware of how fortunate I've been, in terms of friendship and creativity. But I haven't worked out a way of getting fat. I've just gone about my life, doing what I feel I must and can, as the demand arises, and the demand is as likely to be an internal as an external one. If the results add up to a particular position of guruhood, well, that has never been aimed at. It exists as a nice kind of accident."