

Ingrid Jonker

Poet under Apartheid

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Writing Ingrid Jonker

‘There can never be a definitive biography, merely a version, an attempt, an essay which in time reveals how completely all such attempts bear the impress of the age in which it was written.’

– Eric Homberger & John Charmley,
The troubled face of biography

The fascination with Ingrid Jonker

When Ingrid Jonker took her own life by walking into the sea at Three Anchor Bay in Cape Town on 19 July 1965 at the age of 31, she became the stuff of legend and rumour. Looking back on her legacy, one may wonder why this is so. The shortness of her life and the slenderness of her literary oeuvre seem out of all proportion to the biographical, critical and creative attention that has been devoted to her. Her collected writings can be contained within one compact volume. Apart from two volumes of poetry published in her lifetime and a volume published posthumously, she left only a few short stories, a play and a scattering of other texts.

To what should one ascribe her iconic status and the continuing fascination with her life and work? The answer to this probably lies in a combination of factors. There is no doubt that the easily sensationalised details of her life provide a provocative glimpse into a particularly turbulent period of Afrikaner and South African history. Her private history (a materially deprived childhood, a difficult relationship with her father, her frank and spontaneous sexuality, her unhappy love affairs, her suicide) coincided with major developments in public history. The 1950s saw a rapid escalation of apartheid laws to ensure the segregation of South African society and the early 1960s began dramatically with the shootings at Sharpeville, the banning of the ANC and PAC, South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth and the declaration of a Republic. Ingrid's response to these and other events and her identification with the plight of the oppressed in South Africa brought her into conflict with her father, at that time a National Party politician, as well as with other authority figures of Afrikanerdom. As part of a bohemian circle of friends with liberal values in Cape Town, she identified herself with the ideal of a society in which freedom of speech and association was recognised. Her life was also closely intertwined with the work of the Sestigers, who were busy rewriting Afrikaner history and literature by opposing the political and literary establishment of the time.

Although hers was an eventful life that provides a win-

dow on the tensions of South Africa at a certain moment in its history, it would not have made the same impact but for her poetry. For her mentor, Uys Krige, her poetry was ‘the essential Ingrid stripped of her incompleteness, of the little human flaws and shortcomings we all share’.¹ An academic analysis of her poetry’s appeal would refer to its pure lyricism, its powerful almost surrealist imagery, its confident musicality, its sensitivity to all the nuances of her mother tongue and its ability to infuse the political with the personal. It is more difficult to discern why her best poems appeal to both poetry-lovers and poetry-avoiders alike. One of the answers may lie in the fact that she started writing poems when she was about six and her poetry, despite its increasing sophistication, never lost its almost childlike clarity and freshness. It may also be that readers feel the force of her urgency to communicate with others through her poetry, that they feel directly spoken to by her poems.

It is therefore not surprising that it was her poetry, more specifically the poem ‘Die kind’ (translated into English as ‘The child’), that brought her to the attention of South Africa and the larger world when Nelson Mandela read it at the opening of South Africa’s first democratic parliament on 24 May 1994. Without doubt, Mandela’s reference to Ingrid Jonker contributed hugely to the revival of interest in her person and her work. Although she always had a strong following in Afrikaans literary circles,² journalists started digging up the details of her life in the

week after Mandela's speech and a new revised edition of her collected works was published before the year was out. In the years that followed new English translations of her work appeared and several documentary films were produced. The first biographical works about her life also started to see the light. A short and gripping biography by the Dutch novelist Henk van Woerden was included in *Ik herhaal je* (2000), a volume that included Gerrit Komrij's translations of Jonker's poetry into Dutch. The first attempt at a comprehensive overview of her life was Petrovna Metelerkamp's *Ingrid Jonker: Beeld van 'n digterslewe* (2003). Rather than a conventional biography, this impressive book consisted of a collection of documents about Ingrid Jonker's life, with the hand of the biographer only visible in the selection and ordering of the material as well as in short interlinking pieces. More information about Ingrid Jonker's life came to light in 2006 when the clinical psychologist L.M. van der Merwe published a series of interviews conducted with people who were close to her for his doctoral thesis in psychology twelve years after her death, in *Gesprekke oor Ingrid Jonker* [Conversations about Ingrid Jonker]. In addition to two Afrikaans plays about her life – *Ingrid Jonker: Opdrag* (created by Jana Cilliers in cooperation with the writer Ryk Hattingh in 1997) and *Altyd Jonker* (written and produced by Saartjie Botha in 2006) – her life was captured in the 2011 film *Black Butterflies* by the Dutch director Paula van der Oest, starring Carice van Houten as Ingrid Jonker.

Such is the fascination with Ingrid Jonker that André Brink has spoken of an ‘industry’ that has sprung up around her death.³ It is a fascination that shows no sign of abating.

Writing Ingrid Jonker

In using the materials available to reconstruct Ingrid Jonker’s life and interpret her work, we must remember that no document is inert or innocent. Letters, diaries, and biographical and autobiographical writings are never neutral representations of reality. They often constitute deliberate acts of self-creation, self-justification or even self-promotion that have to be reckoned with. Moreover, private documents often make use of rhetorical strategies or coded languages that are difficult to interpret. For the biographer, therefore, the task at hand is not simply a matter of decoding the available documents, but rather of cautiously interpreting them. The same goes for information gleaned from interviews conducted with people who knew Ingrid Jonker. Their memories are necessarily determined by the nature of their relationship with her and by their subjective interpretation of events. We also know that memories of the past are subject to complex processes of editing and erasure; nor are they free of self-interest and self-preservation. One could argue that the many photographs of Ingrid Jonker speak unambiguously to the viewer, that they are impervious to the passage of time and the erosion of memory. We

should, however, heed Susan Sontag's warning that 'photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is'.⁴ Photographs do not escape the mediatedness that the use of language inevitably entails.

Any biographical endeavour is also fraught with ethical questions. When reading documents like letters and diaries, it is difficult for the biographer to escape the feeling that she is invading another's private space. When writing about someone's private life and intimate thoughts, it is almost inevitable that the biographer should wonder what the limits of such revelations are. It is precisely this aspect of biography that has led critics to use the tropes of thievery, voyeurism, invasion and violation. On the other hand the right to privacy is not self-evident. Paul John Eakin observes in 'Mapping the ethics of life writing': 'Because we live our lives in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate where one life leaves off and another begins.' For Eakin, life writing, indeed life itself, is messier than traditional ethical models suggest. As he says, it is not easy to argue that one owns the facts of one's life, as Ted Hughes claimed in the face of the relentless biographers of his wife Sylvia Plath. Eakin identifies respect for the autobiographical subject as *the* basic guideline when writing either a biography or an autobiography.⁵

This will be an important guideline in my own attempt to reconstruct Ingrid Jonker's life and evaluate her work. For this reason I will not attempt to describe

those parts of her life for which we have no information (a strategy perfectly acceptable in a novelised life). This brief introduction to her life and work, set against the background of her time and place, will also try to resist the temptation to romanticise a life lived in difficult circumstances or read it in terms of a single grand narrative that predetermined all the events in her life, be it political or psychoanalytical. Although I will discuss some of her literary texts and speculate about the connection between the writer's life and her writings, my attempts will be guided by the understanding that poems and stories originate from a complex interplay between fact and fiction and are sometimes pure fiction. This biography will engage with those details available in order to arrive at yet another understanding of the phenomenon Ingrid Jonker. It also builds on the work of those who have come before, thus taking its place as one of an ongoing series of interpretations of her life which will become more nuanced as further information becomes available. As such it is, inevitably, part of the 'industry' around Jonker.

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