**Contributor: Willie Burger**

**Entry: Schoeman, Karel (1939–)**

Although Karel Schoeman is not as well known as his South African contemporaries, André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Breyten Breytenbach, he is one of the finest South African novelists. He was born on 26 October 1939 in the small town of Trompsburg in the southern Free State – a specific setting to which he often returns in his later fiction. He grew up with his mother, first in Bloemfontein and later in Paarl. After obtaining a BA degree from the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, Schoeman converted to Catholicism and studied at the St John Vianny Seminary in Pretoria. In 1961 he left for Ireland to be trained in the Franciscan Order. (His 1966 novel, *By fakkellig* (*By Torch Light*), is set in Ireland, and contains allegorical references to race relations in South Africa.)

He returned to South Africa in 1964 without being ordained, obtained a qualification as a librarian and for a while worked in Johannesburg. He found the attitudes and cultural life in South Africa too conservative and restrictive and left the country for The Netherlands. From 1968-1973 he worked as a librarian in Amsterdam, then spent the next three years as a nurse in Glasgow. When resistance against South Africa’s apartheid government boiled over into violence in 1976, he felt compelled to return to South Africa, working first as a translator in Pretoria and then as a librarian in Bloemfontein, before settling in Cape Town in 1982. He worked in the archives of the South African Library for eighteen years until his retirement in 1999 when he returned to Trompsburg. Currently he lives in Bloemfontein.

Schoeman’s work in the archives, in close contact with documents recording the past, led to his writing approximately fifty books on the history of South Africa – covering the period from the first Dutch settlement in 1652 to the 20th century, and dealing with a variety of themes: for example, slavery in the Cape, the work of early missionaries, the lives of various women (such as Olive Schreiner and Machtelt Smit), the history of architecture in the Free State, and Sotho-diaries from the Boer War.

The central thrust behind his historical research and behind most of his eighteen novels is the question about the place of European culture in Africa, and in particular questions about Afrikaner identity. By examining the history of European settlement in South Africa, he contemplates the place and the future of the descendants of European settlers in Africa. Initially his reflections on this problem were portrayed obliquely, for example, in *By fakkellig* (1966), but these reflections become quite explicit in *Na die geliefde land* (1972) (translated as *Promised Land* and turned into a feature film in 2002).

In all his novels, but even more explicitly in the ‘Voices’ trilogy, Schoeman gives a voice to marginalized individuals: an ignored and forgotten old woman, an unstable young girl, a crippled administrator, a foreign visitor, and an illiterate shepherd. The voices speak from the archives, from the darkness of the past that is a foreign country, demanding to be heard, to be remembered. These voices of sensitive and sometimes highly cultivated individuals who find themselves in a strange and hostile environment tell of the struggle to remember, to recover what has happened in the past, to make sense of all their experiences. Schoeman’s main characters are typically outsiders, unable to connect socially or emotionally with others, struggling to understand the country, its people, and on a purely existential level, themselves.

This contemplation reaches a ripeness in the later novels – *’n Ander land* (1984) (translated as *Another Country*, 1991) and especially in the ‘Voices’ trilogy – *Hierdie lewe* (*This life*,1993), *Die uur van die engel* (*The Hour of the Angel*, 1995), and *Verliesfontein* (*Fountain of Loss*, 1998), as well as in *Verkenning* (*Reconnaissance*, 1996). These works count among of the most astute interrogations of the effects of colonialism in South African.

Schoeman has been awarded all the major prizes for Afrikaans fiction and non-fiction and received recognition from France in the form of the *Prix Amphi* for the French translation of *Afskeid en vertrek* (*Take Leave and Go*) and the *Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger* for *Hierdie lewe* (*This life*).

**References and further readings**

Burger, W. (2000). ‘Karel Schoeman’s Voices from the Past: Narrating the Anglo-Boer War’, *Current Writing* 12 (1): 1-16.

**List of works**

*By fakkellig* (1966)

*Na die geliefde land* (1972)

*’n Ander land* (1984)

*Hierdie lewe* (1993)

*Die uur van die engel* (1995)

*Verkenning* (1996)

*Verliesfontein* (1998)