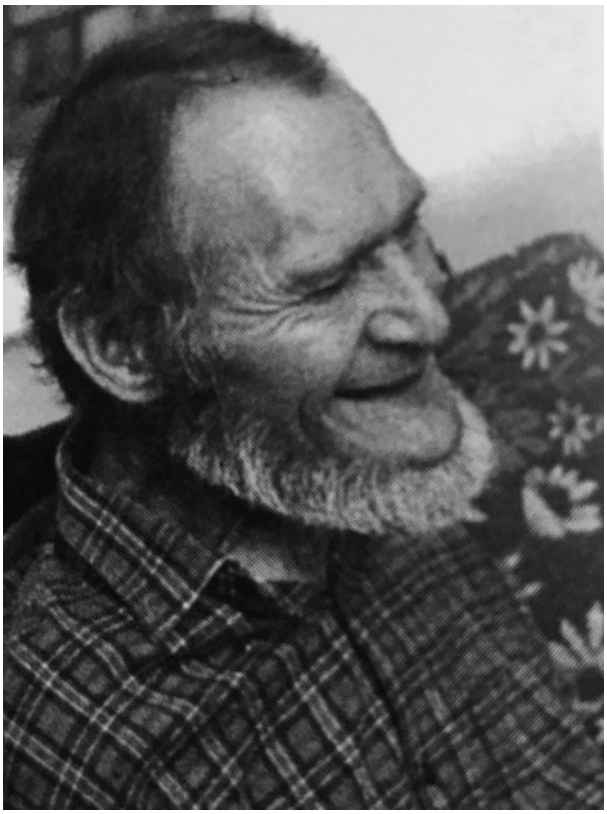
Lionel Abrahams: A Voice For This Season

by [Jillian Becker](#) (October 2020)

Old Timer, Edith Park Truesdell, 1983

Lionel Abrahams (1928-2004) was a South African poet, novelist, critic, editor, publisher—and mentor, teacher, guru to a multitude of writers. He is not as well known outside his own country as he deserves to be.



He had been a pupil and protégé of the humorist Herman Charles Bosman—often called "the Mark Twain of South Africa"—whose complete works he edited for publication. Lionel was like his teacher in being benignly witty, with a love of the droll, the curious, the offbeat. But he was an original thinker with his own literary voice and writing style, and he was intensely serious about the importance of art and literature.

His published works are five volumes of poetry, two novels, numerous articles and essays. His public addresses and lectures, testaments all to a finely perceptive intellect, have been collected; and a Festschrift of his prose and poems was brought out in celebration of his 60th birthday. The honors and awards bestowed on him (honorary doctorates from the universities of the Witwatersrand and Natal and four prestigious literary prizes) were justly earned.

The title of one of his volumes of poems is *A Writer in Sand*. A book published in tribute to him has the title *A*

Writer in Stone, and it is apt. Much of what he wrote and said deserves to be recorded in the permanence of stone. Permanence, the continuing increase of knowledge and creation, and the ever-growing records of the human story, were what mattered most to him. He would have abhorred the "cancel culture" fashionable now in 2020 among academics and revolutionary activists in America and Britain; been appalled by the movement's philistine urge to destroy statues, monuments, books; outraged by the destruction itself.

Lionel's daily life was a struggle with the severe physical disability of cerebral palsy. He was what was commonly called a "spastic." As a child he was confined to a wheelchair. When he was eleven, he stood up and walked—though awkwardly—and he continued to walk without prop or aid for most of the rest of his life. When he wrote as he rarely did about his suffering, it was never with self-pity. His humor emerges even when he demands explanation for his pain from a putative omnipotent Maker. I quote in part:[1]

> God, my torturer (if You exist
> And made me, You have made me
> Ache these months on end),
> What do you want of me?
> If your aim's interrogation,
> Why all this coercion and never a question?
> I'd talk, I'd talk, omniscient inquisitor,
> If there were beans I could spill
> That weren't already Your secret.
>
> Is my acknowledgement the act You need
> Enough to rack it out of me,
> Some humbling of this head You gave me
> stiff with common sense?
>
> Some may interpret purposes divine—
> To test or temper, purify, refine—
> When they are burned and hammered;

But I’m of Adam’s line, not made of steel.
If You grill me on some sacrificial flame
In the sheer mystery of Your sanctifying well,
You’ll only prove my shriveling stuff’s corruptible.
I have to pick my own way on the line
Between the pains by which I have a chance to grow
And those that ruin me.

Lionel pursued happiness. The name he gave the disabled protagonist of his novels was Felix. In a chapter of *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan*, fifteen-year-old Felix starts to move about Johannesburg on his own by learning how to climb on and off trams and buses:

> [O]ne strange evening . . . [Felix] forced himself to go alone to the tram stop near his house and board a tram unaided for the first time in his life . . . So he set himself free to come and go about town and the suburbs as he pleased.

I met Lionel at university when I was sixteen and he was twenty. He and I were the two aspiring writers in our English class. We instantly became friends. I often visited him at home in his parents’ house, taking my writings with me. We would talk enjoyably about my work, his work, and “their” work—the authors who had achieved print. I now suppose it likely that our sessions were more to my benefit than his, though years later he told me that he’d valued my faith in him.

After the death of his mother, he shared a house with one of his married sisters. He would sit in his study with the doors open and every bright day visitors would come through the gate and walk straight up the drive and into his room, knowing they would be warmly received, to sit beside him—and metaphorically at his feet. The room could sometimes overflow. Nobody minded having to stand to enjoy the talk.

His greatest happiness was achieved when, at the age of fifty-eight, he married the novelist and poet Jane Fox. They lived with her children in a large sprawling house on some acres of the veld north of Johannesburg. He held once-a-week afternoon "workshops," writing-seminars to which all were welcome who chose to come, to bring their work for reading and discussion, or just to listen. His loyalty was always unwaveringly to the work, which meant that he was a rigorous critic. But though his criticism was unsparing, it was delivered with such concern for the work, respect for the effort and desire to bring out the best from the writer, that none felt deterred, let alone offended, when it was adverse. Because he was effortlessly sweet-tempered, those who submitted their work to his judgment could be left feeling almost as complimented when he faulted it as when he praised it.

He inspired the novice, encouraged the timid, delighted and even excited many. He believed ardently that art should be a source of joy; felt it so strongly himself that he would infect his audiences with it. They rewarded him with affection and veneration.

Lionel launched his first magazine, *The Purple Renoster,* in 1956 from his parents' house. (Later he founded two more literary periodicals, and co-founded two book publishing companies.) He selected stories, essays, poems for publication from the offerings of many eager beginners. Extraordinarily in segregated South Africa, *The Purple Renoster* published the work of black writers as well as white. The renowned writer and academic, Njabulo Ndebele—honored with doctorates by universities in Britain, America, Holland, and Japan—relates that he submitted his first poems to Lionel when he discovered that there was a literary magazine which would publish black writers. Decades later, at a public meeting, he reminded Lionel of this, telling him sternly, "You rejected them." Then, after a pause, he added affably, to the delight

of the audience, “But you sent me a two-page letter explaining why.”

Lionel also determinedly published, under pseudonyms, authors who were subject to government “gag” orders. The censors suspected that somehow they were being challenged by the little magazine, but could not quite make out how. On one occasion his room was raided by Special Branch officers who took away five books and his typewriter. A few months later, a new issue of *The Purple Renoster* was banned. The guardians of public morals had found one story in it they could legally denounce as offensive.

Lionel was not in South Africa when that happened. Neither was I. In June 1960 I emigrated from South Africa with my husband and two daughters. There were people I felt sad about leaving behind. One of them was Lionel. I asked him to come with us to visit Europe, and he did. We sailed on a Union-Castle liner to Britain, and traveled on to Paris. There he chose to remain when I and mine left for Italy and Greece. After a few weeks, he returned to London for five months. By the time we came back to settle there, he had sailed home. After that our friendship was continued for the rest of his life chiefly by correspondence. (He preferred to type rather than write with a pen. Hand half closed, the fingers stiffly bent, he would depress key after key of the typewriter with the middle knuckle of his forefinger. Thus he wrote his letters, his university essays, exam papers, poems, essays, reviews, speeches, novels. Understandably, he welcomed the advent of the much easier word-processor keyboard. We sent each other manuscripts, our published books, and reviews of them. I contrived to get my books into his hands even though they were embargoed or banned.

We met in person at intervals when I made flying visits to my home city. The first was some three years after we had last seen each other. He had grown a beard. His stiffness of movement was no worse. There was no sign of a deterioration

that doctors had predicted for him. (He had been told as a child that he would live to be about 40, but they were wrong. He lived to celebrate his 78th birthday.) His air was strikingly self-confident; his face marked with strain but just as indelibly with humor. Though there was much cause for concern and sorrow in his personal life and in the country, there was also, always for him, cause for laughter.

In the late 1970s, one public calamity—comparatively minor but important to Lionel—hurt and angered him. The Johannesburg branch of PEN International was forced out of existence. It had been moribund until, in the 1960s—around the middle of the apartheid period—Lionel and a few others stoked it back to life by getting it to accept black members. In 1977, non-whites were elected on to its committee. Lionel, also elected, called this the launching of "PEN II". Periodic general meetings were held when members read to each other—including works that had been banned by the state censors.

Black members of the new committee soon began to make more changes. They persuaded a majority of their fellow members to lower the qualifications for membership of PEN from the long-established and internationally accepted two published works of a certain minimum length to one of any length. Lionel did not demur. The rules were changed accordingly. Next the activists demanded that the rules be changed again to admit writers who had not yet been published at all. Lionel accepted that change too, since it made it easier for aspiring black writers to join. But the next demand was that members need not to have written anything, or have any intention of writing anything.

The advocates, black and white, for this innovation pointed to the African tradition of oral story-telling and the chanting in chorus of praise poems. Lionel reluctantly bowed to the majority wish. He agreed that all might come who wished to *perform* their works. But he spoke of a need to uphold

“standards.” He suggested that occasionally, a few times a year, there could be a reading by invited writers chosen for the quality of their work. The convenors of the invited readings would “discriminate, compare and choose on literary-critical grounds, in a search for the best that was going.” His proposal was rejected. Whites, the black members decreed, could not judge the work of Blacks.

To them politics, not literature, was what mattered. In the previous year, 1976, a massacre by government forces of black students protesting in the streets of Soweto changed the mood of Blacks throughout the country. The beginning of the end of the apartheid regime is often marked from that date.

PEN itself was then declared by its black members to be unacceptable. It was a white organization, they said, and it must go. Lionel Abrahams and the (subsequently) Nobel Prize-winning novelist J. M. Coetzee were against the dissolution. The other (subsequently) Nobel Prize-winning South African author, Nadine Gordimer, was for it. She argued that “the pressures the black members had been subjected to” —for belonging to an organization that *included white members*—necessitated its closing.

Lionel wrote:

> In 1977 white and black writers resuscitated the Johannesburg branch of the international writers’ guild, PEN, and thus formed an association which defied and transcended the apartheid barrier, so that they could learn to know each other, learn from each other and support and protect each other in resistance to the ravages of censorship and police bullying. And then . . . I saw the flux of political motivations within the membership destroy the organization on account of the very thing that was best about it. Its multiracial composition had become repugnant to the black consciousness faction in the anti-apartheid struggle . . .

> [A]t the academic level, the theorists of literature, carried away by a bizarre international fashion, were overthrowing the whole tradition of beauty, subtlety, profundity, originality, complexity, humanity and truth … Much of the thinking was rooted in Marxism . . .
>
> [An author's] class, age, gender, racial identity and ideological orientation became more worth noticing than his or her creative gifts . . .
>
> [I]n dismissing the received standards if literary excellence as merely a Eurocentric cultural convention, the white critics were in effect saying to the black [writers]: 'The best is not expected of you; the best is not for your enjoyment.[2]

He was implacably opposed to the political activists' claim that a work be evaluated according to the skin color of the author before anything else was taken into account; that "black" literature be declared the winner against "white" literature before the starting gun is fired. He saw this development as a regrettable loss chiefly to black writers.

> . . . [T]he new writers were essaying an entry into . . . the world of printed literature addressed to literate readers . . . [T]he traditional literary aesthetic *is relevant* to their undertaking. Its labeling as 'Eurocentric' is crude and erroneous. The traditional aesthetic is vastly capacious, multi-form, ever-evolving, and it defines the means by which the new writer may invent his individual style, may discover his own way of touching and moving the reader.

He rebuked the Whites who thought they were demonstrating their anti-racist virtue by allowing the abandonment of color-blind judgment:

> I'm greatly worried by the implication that in looking at Black writing we ought not to be concerned about

> literary standards . . . Because no matter what ideological reasons you can offer for not requiring black writers to meet the ordinary literary standards, your adjusted expectations can't fail to come out as condescending to the black writers . . .
>
> [W]e are living amid 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 . . . I have to wait while the exasperated, the disappointed, the misled try their hand at . . . overhauling everything—even the hospitals that succour their own people, even the museums, libraries and universities . . . remaking all in the image of Africa. But . . . the opening of our society lends a new urgency to the maintenance of our standards as individuals and as bearers of our inherited culture . . . We have to guard our own, not *against* others, but, in the first place, *for* ourselves, and in the second place *for* others, our compatriots . . . when, if ever, they may choose to share it, for the future of the land.
>
> So, while I will not try to proselytize anybody or establish a cultural colony, neither will I desert my own values . . . I will not withhold criticism when cultural affirmative action results in the publishing and broadcasting of puerile rubbish.

It's a message that needs to be heard in America in 2020, where an academic movement is growing that would stop the study of the works of "dead white men," remove white authors from libraries, make "whiteness" an enemy of black culture and black society. Radical opinion-formers prescribe trashy mendacious works—by both black and white authors steaming about a "systemic racism" that does not exist—for the indoctrination of the young and for "raising consciousness" of "white privilege."

Lionel Abrahams, wise, humane, heroic, envisioned and hoped for a South African literature that was much richer than black and white. He saw that the time for it had not come in his own country.

> The enemy is clearly marked
> in black or white.
> The shades between confuse the issue.[3]

Will the rejection of "white" culture and civilization by black and pro-black revolutionary movements throughout the Western world now render such a hope nugatory?

Many call for cultural apartheid. But are there not still many who believe that "beauty, subtlety, profundity, originality, complexity, humanity and truth" matter more than race?

"People like you complicate the issue," a black friend, writer, disciple, told Lionel.

"Long may the issue remain complicated," he replied.

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[1] From *An Eater of Forbidden Fruit Addresses His Putative Maker* in *A Writer in Sand*, 1988.

[2] The prose quotations come from a lecture given at the Institute of Race Relations in 1996.

[3] From *The Issue* in *Journal of a New Man*, 1984.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary, The New Criterion, The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter, The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren.

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