

Antoinette Pienaar

The  
**Griqua's**  
Apprentice

Ancient healing arts of the Karoo



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Translated from Afrikaans by  
Catherine Knox



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This book is not a medical textbook and the advice given in it is not intended as a replacement for essential medical treatment. The publishers accept no responsibility for any injury that may follow the application of any of the treatments suggested here.

Published by Umuzi  
an imprint of Random House Struik (Pty) Ltd  
Company Reg No 1966/003153/07  
80 McKenzie Street, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
PO Box 1144, Cape Town 8000, South Africa  
umuzi@randomstruik.co.za  
www.randomstruik.co.za

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Original Afrikaans edition entitled *Kruidjie roer my*  
published in 2008 by Umuzi

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ISBN 978-1-4152-0073-5 (Print)  
ISBN 978-1-4152-0432-0 (ePub)  
ISBN 978-1-4152-0433-7 (PDF)

Cover design by Sally Swart  
Front cover photography (background) by Annari van der Merwe and (people) by Frederik de Jager  
Text design by mr design  
Set in Gill Sans, Minion and Caflish Script

Photos on page 23 (pickup), 74 and 118 by Frederik de Jager and on page 85 by Zephne van der Merwe.  
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For Oom Johannes





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## When the Karoo was still water

It is at night, especially, that the silence of the Great Karoo wakes you up.

When that silence echoes from the whitewashed walls of my small house on the hill, I rise stiffly from my bed, light the twelve candles in my candelabrum and gaze out into the night, mesmerised by the quietness dripping down from the stars. It is at night, in this silence, punctuated by Gys the rain grasshopper, chanting for the rain that might be on the way, that I lay out the words like pebbles. Words about how I came to live at Thefontein seven years ago now, learning the stories, the myths and the secrets of the Karoo at Oom Johannes's knee.

It is in this silence that the huge ironstones sing from the fullness of their hearts about the time when the Karoo was still wet, the time when the dry bleached earth lapped and swished from rock to rock with water and strange fish. The rock bears this dim memory of water and, if you press your ear against any of these vast boulders, you can hear the heartbeat of the primal colossus as he remembers the water. And so, if you are born in the Karoo, you are born with the memory of water. It pulses strongly through your veins, and when you are woken by the silence, you can feel the pressure of that ancient water under your heart.

It is in this desolate silence that Oom Johannes's stories come alive again, playing themselves out, one by one before me, like a flickering black-and-white film leaping and dancing through the projector. Stories that open out this primal landscape like an ancient picture book, while inquisitive geckos scuttle down the wall to see if I can also hear the silence.

Just yesterday again, while Oom Johannes and I were out walking in the veld, collecting herbs, he suddenly stopped beside a large mountain tortoise, studied him intently and said, "Without the tortoises we wouldn't get a drop of rain." When I looked at him questioningly, he explained that tortoises were the first animals to pray in times of drought. Creeping in under a bush, the mountain tortoise would go down on his knees to ask for rain for the animals and the plant roots. He would stay like that, praying until the distant thoughts of rain reached his nose on the wind.

So this is how you will find me of a night at Theefontein, under the candles in my candelabrum. When the flames flutter wildly in the wind, my head and shoulders are spattered with wax patterns. You will find me here, paging through my Karoo picture book, turning the stories over one by one like pebbles, and laying a footpath of memories, as Hansel and Gretel did once upon a time. But my path is not out of the forest, but deeper into the dark, fathomless mysteries of the Great Karoo.

## Footpaths

I was born in Carnarvon in 1960, the year of the great flood, when the seven-year drought was broken by thundering waters that swept the plains down to the sea. I was the middle one of five sisters.

In this old town, it was the custom to announce the birth of a baby by raising a blue or pink flag. Within minutes of the flag going up, the news spread through town like wildfire: “Have you heard? Yvonne has gone and had another girl.”

It was common knowledge round town that my father, like most of the men in the region, longed for a son. In the mayhem of that first rain for seven years and all the hanging about in the hospital because of two babies being born that day, my flag was never raised. For many years I ascribed the strange things that happened in my life to the fact that a flag was never raised for me when I was born. Forty-two years later, I was to raise my own flag in my own way here at Theefontein.

As mother of five daughters, my mother combined the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon as she tried to make her daughters useful about the house, teaching them knitting, embroidery and dressmaking. But the child without a flag was incorrigible. I would slip out through the back, quietly, so that the screen door didn't slam shut too loudly, and head for the veld. We lived on the edge of town, so the open veld was our backyard. While my feet trod the hard ground into dusty paths, my impatient heart pounded against my ribs with curiosity. The primal pulse of the Karoo came up through the soles of my feet, like the drumbeat of a forgotten era. Deep in the veld,

I would sit on a rock and listen, frowning in concentration, for something that would tell me more about the Great Place of my birth. My mother did her best to keep me in the house but, in her wisdom, she eventually just let me be. When they asked where I was, her answer was resigned: "The child is somewhere out there in the veld."

This is what taught me about the footpaths: that each one of us has a path; your own footsteps are the only things that can open up that path for you. Our own footprints are as unique to each of us as our fingerprints. In the Karoo, the footpaths are the arteries that crisscross the plains like a giant spider's web; bleached white paths over the hard brown earth. On moonlit nights the footpaths thread their way through the rocks and bushes like wisps of candyfloss. And it is beside the footpaths of the heart that you hide your dreams, like the mountain tortoise buries her eggs in the soil.

## My dream

**S**o I hid this dream along my footpath: the dream of finding someone to teach me about the plants that brushed against my shoes as I crisscrossed the plains. Every time I thought of the dream, I warmed that secret egg, and the life inside it incubated until, forty-two years later, it suddenly hatched. As the mountain tortoise leaves the nest in the ground where she has laid her eggs, she looks back in the knowledge that, once she has gone, the leguan will dig out some of the eggs and that where he leaves off, the meerkat will carry on but, in spite of all this, some of the eggs will hatch. In just the same way, I knew that my dream of getting to know about the Karoo would hatch one day, no matter what.

This fierce conviction landed me in hot water on numerous occasions. As so often happens when you blurt out your dreams to people, they were inclined to snigger behind their handkerchiefs.

The people of Carnarvon were in the habit of packing their cars, loading up their children and driving out to call on friends on nearby farms on Sundays. On arrival, we all greeted the host and hostess courteously; then the children would get a cooldrink.



Before we were all shoed outside to play, we five sisters had to treat everyone to a song. Then, starting with the oldest and going down to the youngest, we were lined up to tell the grown-ups what we wanted to do one day.

The ritual began with the eldest, who said she wanted to become a doctor. Then the second in line would proudly announce that she wanted to be a teacher. When it came to me, I burst out eagerly: “One day I am going to stay in the veld with an old shepherd and learn everything about the plants from him.” This enthusiasm was usually nipped in the bud: “For goodness sake, tell us what you *really* want to be. Don’t play the fool.” But, deep inside me, I kept my egg warm with feverish hope that my dream would come true.

After we’d been out in the garden a while and I, true to type, had grown bored, I made off to the workers’ cottages to play and listen to wonderful stories if the grown-ups were in the mood to entertain the children.

On the neatly raked and swept yard, my mouth would often hang open as Oom Koos Frieslaar recounted tales of the water snake and the mermaids at the spring. The people of the Karoo’s barren landscape were like beds of colourful flowers; it was as if the greyness stimulated people’s imaginations, and as though their stories were splashes of colour. The spate and the silences of a story would sweep me along with them and, sitting there on the stoep among the red geraniums growing in old nightsoil buckets, I saw how Oom Koos hooked each child’s thoughts with his stories, reeling us in and landing us at his feet like fish.

Every farm had its special storyteller, and it was on Sunday afternoons on farms in the district that the story-gogga bit me on a tender spot. This is what sent me to Stellenbosch after school to study drama. For this Karoo child, the green oaks and the Boland mountains were like something from another planet, and when I stepped into the drama department and met the inhabitants of that planet, the colourful talismans I had brought along in my small trove of personal treasures suddenly seemed as dull as limestone to me.

I realised early on that I would make an unlikely Juliet for any Romeo. Out on the wide open spaces of the Karoo, my long legs

