

A Change of Heart

- This text comes from a short story (nouvelle) written by Jeffrey Archer in 2000 (two thousand)
- The story takes place in South Africa at the time of apartheid : there are allusions to segregation and racism (« restricted to whites » , « Crossroads »= a township). The people's names sound Dutch, and a lot of white South Africans are of Dutch origin.
- It tells the story of a man whose life was completely changed after an accident.

The characters :

The main character is Stoffel Van Den Berg, a white South African. Inga is his wife and Martinus de Jong is one of Stoffel's friends and colleagues.

At the beginning Stoffel is in hospital after a serious car accident. The other man involved in the accident, a black man, has died.

Stoffel himself is seriously injured and his heart stops beating, however, the other driver's widow (veuve) agrees to donate her husband's heart to save Stoffel.

After the operation Stoffel is told what happened.

He is shocked when he learns that the other driver has died and, when he realizes that a black man's heart has saved him he can't believe it.

Although the heart transplant has succeeded , the prognosis isn't good at all (1.22). He is so shocked with the news that he can't speak for some time. Moreover when he is told that he only has 3 or 4 years left to live the blow is so hard that he falls into a deep sleep. He must have been devastated.

However, the people around him do their best to help and cheer him up (remonter le moral):

His wife, Inga, is caring (she stands at her bedside), she feels concerned about him (1.2) (1.30). She is also generous « cashing the life insurance was her idea »

Martinus is supportive and helpful (1.31 – 32 – 38) He is curious about what Stoffel intends to do with the money.

Stoffel's attitude to life / the other plans he has in mind :

The accident and the sad news have opened Stoffel's eyes. He decides to change his life completely. Instead of working in a bank, he decides to help other people, probably to give some meaning to his life. He is so close to death that he feels he must make the most of what he has got left. It is now important for him to give meaning to his life.

That's why he dedicates the rest of his life to the education of black children in a township. He teaches them English and plays with them. At first, the children keep staring at him as they can't believe that this white man wants to help them. Then they lend him a hand. He also tries to fight delinquency (gangs = an important problem in townships).

[Townships were in fact no more than shanty towns (bidonvilles) and violent places where it was difficult to survive because of the drunks and hoodlums and people so desperate they could kill for a little money.]

Past mistakes :

When Martinus alludes to « past mistakes », he means racial prejudices so common in South Africa at the time of apartheid (1.52 to 57). Stoffel's change of heart has had an impact on him too.

The title « a change of heart » is very well chosen because of the pun on the word « heart »: it means of course, literally, that he has now a different heart after his heart transplant but also that he has changed his mind, he has changed his way of looking at things so that he is no longer prejudiced. The accident has made him aware of how wrong racial prejudices are.

Here are a few facts about apartheid :

Apartheid was a policy which advocated and enforced racial segregation. It was imposed by right-wing extremists in 1948. Then, Black people and white people couldn't live together. It was forbidden for them to go to the same public places as the whites and the children couldn't go to the same schools. The blacks had to live in **townships** (black townships at a distance of white cities) or **homelands**. They worked for the whites – they had menial jobs – and had to go back to the townships after 6 o'clock at night. They were not allowed to go where they wanted and they had to carry a **passbook**. However the women who were domestic servants stayed in the houses of the people they worked for and could only see their children on Sundays. Besides, the Blacks were denied the right to vote and they were totally excluded from politics.

That's why they had to fight for their rights with people like Nelson Mandela who dedicated their lives to this struggle. Pressures from the world, economic sanctions helped put an end to apartheid.

On March 17th 1992, a referendum was organized by Frederik De Klerk, the president, to grant more rights to black people. Only the whites could vote then and 66% of them voted yes.

Nelson Mandela spent 28 years of his life in prison. He was imprisoned first in 1962, then in 1964 on a charge of sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the government by revolution. He was released in 1990. He became the first black president of South Africa in 1994. He retired in 1999.

The apartheid laws were abolished from 1991 to 1994. Nelson Mandela won the Nobel peace prize with Frederik De Klerk (the former president) in 1993.