

Book review

Title: *Rykie: 'n Lewe met Woorde (A Life with Words)*
Author: Lizette Rabe
Publisher: Tafelberg Publishers Ltd, Cape Town, South Africa, 2011
Reviewed by: Ruchelle Barker
Pages: 396
ISBN: 978-0-624-05297-5

Journalism professor Lizette Rabe of Stellenbosch University takes on the big challenge of documenting the life of the 'legendary' Afrikaans female journalist Rykie Van Reenen. In her book, Rabe argues that despite Van Reenen's private nature, it is necessary to appreciate the journalistic contributions of this ground-breaking female South African journalist and renowned Afrikaans writer of the second half of the twentieth century. The book reminds us of the patriarchal oppression South African women experienced and how Van Reenen overcame male dominance, especially in the field of journalism.

Van Reenen's influence on the professionalising of journalism made an important contribution to the liberation of women in gaining access to the field of Afrikaans journalism specifically in South Africa. Although various other authors have played significant roles in the empowerment of women, especially in the workplace, women today are denouncing feminism as irrelevant to their time and fail to acknowledge the feminist movements, which afforded them career opportunities and women's rights. The post-feminist movement, mostly defined as the de-politicisation of second wave feminism, has stirred numerous debates regarding the relevance of feminism today, arguing that feminist struggles are over and feminists have failed in what they set out to achieve. The failure to appreciate the value of feminist struggles is problematic in the sense that post-feminist thought is criticised as creating a 'false feminism' of independence and

empowerment (McRobbie, 2009). It is therefore important to recognise feminist stories, like those in this book, as they serve to unveil the oppression of women in the newsroom and broader society, as well as open up the dissemination of feminist thought and debate, which highlights the complexities of the gendered movement, the centrality of gender intersections, and the power dynamics at work in representing the gendered other.

The first five chapters offer an introduction to the history of Van Reenen's upbringing, university years and the start of her career in journalism. More specifically, these chapters focus on how she entered the male-dominated territory of the Afrikaans world of Naspers' journalism, and how her career developed as specialist features writer and as political and social commentator. This first part of the book serves as a valuable historical outline of the gender inequality of those times in newsrooms, and how the influential writing role she assumed transformed journalism as a profession for later generations of women. Against more recent viewpoints that feminism plays a significant role in newsroom culture, the importance of gender in the production of news should not be underestimated as female journalists remain to be treated, more often than not, as a minority in newsrooms (North, 2004).

Although this book is not a textbook, it is strongly relevant to the gender politics of today as it greatly expands our understanding of feminist-movement behaviour. The book highlights Van Reenen's resistance and challenge to dominant gender discourses of her time, mostly taking up a feminist position regarding gender equality and patriarchal power relations, especially during the time of the male-dominated Afrikaner Nationalist regime. Her almost natural feminist resistance towards hegemonic gender norms and hierarchies has provided a platform for the professionalization of journalism for women. As Sterk and Knoppers (2009, p. 10) explain, "When people undo, resist, or challenge cultural notions of gender, those acts promote change". This is indeed what Rabe eloquently describes regarding Van Reenen. It becomes clear that although Van Reenen did not explicitly reject or proclaim feminism, she "just was" a woman who stood up against a male dominated journalistic environment. The number of women working in newsrooms has increased during the past decades. However, compared to men, they

occupy more low-status positions than management positions and tend to cover ‘softer’ stories. This functions to exclude women from mainstream newspapers.

One of the most important chapters in this book is the sixth, which depicts Van Reenen’s interest in politics and describes her work as a political journalist. Her true influence on democracy within South Africa is reflected in her involvement in the establishment of a ‘liberal’ Afrikaans newspaper practice. Rabe explains how, as a progressive thought leader, Van Reenen contributed to the idea of a new political ideology aimed at the founding of a democratic South Africa, which included her landmark interview with Steve Biko. During this time in South Africa, oppressive laws prohibited the quoting of the Black Consciousness leader in the media. With her talent and writing ability, Van Reenen was able to by-pass these restrictions and gave voice to the idea of a democratic South Africa. Her articles resulted in great controversy within conservative Afrikaner political and cultural ranks, especially drawing the disapproval of governing male politicians of her involvement in political journalism. Her work was paternalistically downgraded as that of an “*arme ou vroultjie*”, i.e. "pathetic little woman" (Rabe, 2011, p. 132). However, this chapter showcases Van Reenen’s resilience to criticism and her belief in journalistic integrity; she was not threatened by their commentary.

The next few chapters outline the story of Van Reenen’s writing in terms of her ability as talented book writer and reviewer and offer an analysis of her collection of letters, which provides insights into her personal life and her many achievements and accolades, including an honorary doctorate degree from Stellenbosch University. According to Rabe (2011), these accomplishments made Van Reenen an inspiration to aspiring writers and highlighted the role she played as mentor for other journalists. Although Rabe (2011) thoughtfully organises these chapters by individual themes and extensively supports statements of Van Reenen through her vast use of anecdotal information and interviews, the hagiographical nature of the text seems to be repetitive. It might also have been valuable for Rabe to take a more critical stance towards Van Reenen, for in the long run one might question the objectivity with which the book was written. The last two chapters conclude with Van Reenen’s battle with illness and how her brave nature shone through these difficult times. Rabe (2011) concludes with affirming the need to

document the works of important journalists and writers, not only to keep their work alive, but also to keep the history and future of South African journalism prospering.

What is distinctive of this book is that it focuses on a specifically South African woman journalism pioneer, which is a very limited genre of historical writing. The most powerful feature of the book is that it is useful to both newcomers and professionals in the field of gender and journalism, providing much more than a cursory understanding of the socio-political context and thought processes of Van Reenen's time. The book not only deepens our understanding of journalistic history and the location of women within the field of journalism, but stimulates a critical view of the gender system across social, historical and political contexts in South Africa during Van Reenen's time.

Although the book provides an overview of the oppression that women experienced in the workplace, the main critique is probably that it is limited in the manner of how it recognises the complexities and intersectionality of gendered politics and struggles that women faced within the patriarchal ideology of that time. The book tends falsely to simplify feminist scholarship. The relations between power, knowledge and male dominance are largely absent from the book. For example, although the book departs from a feminist perspective and advocates feminist thought's breaking through male dominance, feminism is mostly portrayed as the resistance against the notion that women are inferior to men (e.g. Rabe, 2011, p. 54) or the rejection of a feminine gender identity (e.g. Rabe, 2011, p. 69). As such, it probably falls short in not highlighting the intricacies of the broader political, social and economic spheres in which power and knowledge are produced and which maintain gender inequality and oppression, ultimately ignoring integral aspects associated with feminism. A more valuable contribution could have been a comprehensive inclusion of feminist insights and lessons from Van Reenen's life as a female journalist devoted to raising consciousness of and exposing male power. This is especially because gender equality in journalism remains an issue in South African journalism.

In conclusion, Rabe succeeds in offering a tactful, in-depth and thought-provoking historical account of the life and work of Rykie Van Reenen. The book provides a valuable exploration of

South African journalistic history and offers a broad introduction to women's liberation in Afrikaans journalism. It also locates and validates the history and achievements of women across the journalistic sphere, specifically in South Africa. Delivering on its promise, *Rykie: 'n Lewe Met Woorde*, is a very welcome contribution to the journalistic history of South Africa, especially pertaining to the contributors to Afrikaans journalism history. It is compulsory reading for anyone interested in understanding the journalistic history of South Africa.

References

- McRobbie, A. 2009. *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. London: Sage.
- North, L. 2004. Naked women, feminism, and newsroom culture. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 31(2): 53-67.
- Sterk, H. & Knoppers, A. 2009. *Gender, culture, and physicality: Paradoxes and taboos*. Lanham: Lexington Books.