

## 34. Fred *Khumalo*

In January 1985, I found myself among a horde of kids who had converged on the Technikon Natal, intent on being admitted as students at this institution. Because there was no online registration at the time, you had to be there physically. Some, like me, had applied the previous year and received letters of confirmation that they could come for registration. Others – the majority, in fact – were cold-callers who had not applied. Moreover, they had no clue what they wanted to study.

After a frantic fund-raising campaign – appealing to members of the extended family – my parents had raised R1 000, which would cover my tuition and other expenses for the whole year. Back then, tuition was just R500 per year. After queuing for a few hours at the administration office, my turn finally came. I told the clerk I wanted to register for a National Diploma: Journalism. She told me about a law that stated that I had to register at an institution reserved for “my own people”. Even after I’d shown her a letter from her own institution, inviting me to come and apply in person, she had no time for me.

“as long as there are human beings on earth, journalism will never die”

I, therefore, went to ML Sultan Technikon, which was just down the road anyway. Although the institution had journalism on their prospectus, they were not offering the course that year. Armed with this information, I went back to Technikon Natal. I told the woman what had transpired at the neighbouring institution. But she still seemed determined to keep me out. Though respectful and polite, I was fast losing my patience now. I started raising my voice. Then a big-chested white man with bushy eyebrows approached. “Hier kom kak” (here comes trouble), I thought. But to my surprise, the man took up the fight, not with me, but with the white clerk. He spoke a lot of angry English – my comprehension of the language was still very basic – and then I remember him telling her to get me registered. The bushy-eyebrowed man turned out to be Clive Emdon, the head of the journalism department. I later learnt that, after a black prospective student’s name had been entered into the books, the institution would then have to notify the minister of education that a black person had been admitted at the institution because he couldn’t find space at “designated” institutions. This was the law. The minister at the time was FW de Klerk. The same chap who would, a few years down the line, stage a palace coup against his erstwhile comrade PW Botha, and take over as leader of the

National Party and, later, become president of the republic.

This historical background cannot be left out if my journey as a black journalist in South Africa is to be properly narrated. Having been admitted to the institution, I faced another problem: accommodation. I mentioned earlier that my parents had secured enough money to last me a year. But Technikon Natal did not allow black people to stay on campus, even if they could afford to pay for it. Long story short, I ended up squatting at my aunt’s servant’s quarters. She worked as a “maid” on Sydenham Road in Morningside.

Classes began. Out of around 50 students, there were seven Africans, three Indians and the rest were white. There was not a single coloured person. English being a very distant second language for some of us black students, we had to work harder than our classmates – just to understand what was going on. Our political science lecturer was Robert Melville. He spoke a brand of English the black kids struggled with. We later learnt that he spoke “with a Scottish accent”. Whatever that meant. I had always thought myself fairly proficient in written English, but the English spoken by those white people at tech was a far cry from the little English that I was used to. While in high school, I’d worked in white peoples’ gardens to earn pocket money. The English spoken to me then, was simple: “Boy, clean swimming pool.” “Boy, cut grass.” “Boy, coffee time.” Simple stuff. Now I get to the technikon, and Mr Melville speaks to me through his nose, nywa-nywa. Difficult.

Many of my black classmates dropped out at the end of the first semester, I persevered. When we were in second year, I was the first student to have work published in a professional publication. Yes, in 1986, I had an opinion piece, together with a mugshot of myself, published in *Cosmopolitan*, that expensive glossy magazine for white women. There was no turning back. Sadly, when we finished our studies, the black students could not find jobs in Durban. It didn’t matter that I’d done better than my white schoolmates, they were offered jobs at *The Mercury*, *Daily News* and *Sunday Tribune*, while none of the papers was interested in me, or my other black former classmates. Anyway, I landed a job with *Ilanga*, and later with *UmAfrika*. Although isiZulu is my mother tongue, I had been trained in English. Therefore, I had to make some adjustments to fit in the isiZulu publishing environment. At *UmAfrika*, I thrived. They allowed me to continue freelancing for English magazines, such as *Tribute* and *Drum* to keep my English writing muscle well flexed. At *UmAfrika*, under the leadership of the great Cyril Madlala, I got the opportunity to try everything from sports reporting, showbiz, politics, general news, photography, page design, you name it.

It was while at *UmAfrika* that I got the opportunity to go to Canada, where I served a six-month internship at the *Toronto Star*. That was 1991. It soon turned out that it was not really an internship where the incumbent makes coffee for the bosses,

run photocopies, and the like – no, in the first few weeks, I shadowed their senior crime reporter. The chap had a device in his car which enabled him to eavesdrop on conversations between cops on the beat. As a result, we were always the first at a crime scene! After that, I was let loose in the newsroom, covering all sorts of local stories. And because I was opinionated at news conferences – my English had improved a lot! – the news editor, Brian McAndrew, one day asked to write an opinion piece. The reception to the piece was great. After that, the op-ed page editor, John Ferri started giving me space to write opinion pieces on anything to do with Africa. Are you listening to this? A 24-year-old kid from Africa, who until recently had struggled with spoken English, was now writing regular columns in Canada's biggest newspaper.

It was inevitable that by the time I got back home, my head had become so big it would not fit inside the offices of UmAfrika. So, I went to City Press, where they soon made me Durban bureau chief.

Very soon though, the bright lights of Johannesburg beckoned. The Sunday Times appointed me deputy news editor in 1996. My primary job was to rewrite copy, but also train young journos. It was around this time that a tall lanky dude by the name of Hugh Kortjaas darkened our door. He became one of my mentees. An alumnus of the Durban University of Technology, Kortjas decided that he didn't want to write under the Hugh moniker. So, he settled for Bareng-Batho. He is the now-famous BBK, sports editor at the Sunday Times.

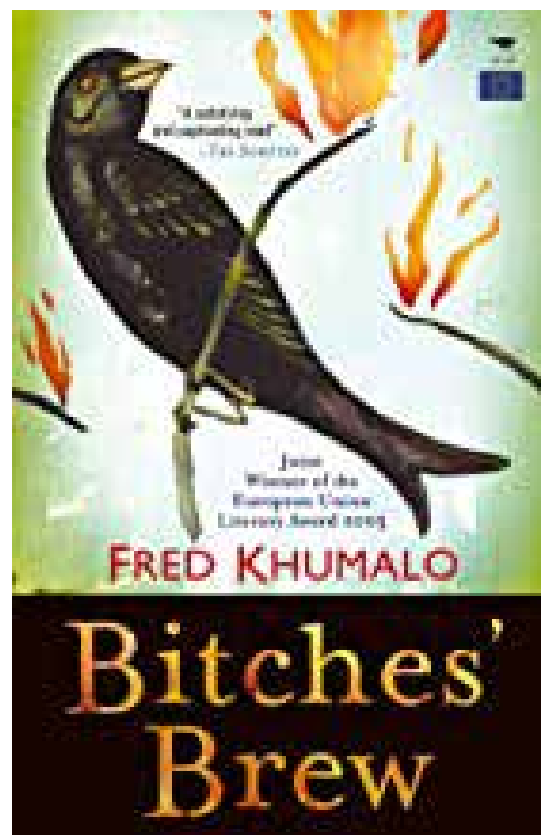
Anyway, back to 1996. No sooner had I arrived at the newspaper than the regular columnist Charlotte Bauer went to the United States for a year-long fellowship. I offered to be a caretaker for her column. That was the birth of the Fred Khumalo column which would run for many years to come. When Bauer came back from the US, she realised she could not have her column back. But we stayed friends. After a year on the news desk, I was appointed editor of the Sunday Times magazine. And I still kept the column!

In 1998, I was appointed founding editor of the Sunday World, an upmarket broadsheet jointly owned by Times Media Limited (who owned the Sunday Times), and New Africa Investments Limited (who owned the Sowetan). The two companies soon decided to turn Sunday World into a down market tabloid. That is when I left . . . straight to the world of the Arikoner Broederbond (brotherhood): I was appointed senior deputy editor at Rapport. To my amazement, and probably that of many others, I lasted three years.

When a Nigerian businessman came to South Africa to launch an upmarket daily paper, he appointed Justice Malala as editor. And Malala immediately recruited me as one of his deputies. This was the ThisDay newspaper. The paper lasted only about two years. I left before it shut down.

And so back to the Sunday Times, where Mondli Makhanya had taken over as editor. I was happy that the Sunday Times I found under the baton of Makhanya was very different from the one I had joined in 1996. For one, there was lot of melanin – not only in staff composition, but in news coverage as well.

Sometimes the paper would lead with a soccer story – which would have been unthinkable in 1996. The transformation agenda was going ahead full steam. I was also happy that what was happening at the Sunday Times, and other newspapers, was also being reflected at journalism schools around the country. It had always struck me as odd that the media, which by design should be at the cutting edge of societal change, was always playing catch-up. As opinions editor at the Times, my job was to lead meetings at which editorial opinions were discussed and assigned. In addition to this, I wrote my regular column, assigned and edited commentary pieces by heavy hitters across the country, and across disciplines: academics, business leaders, government ministers, famous authors including the likes of Ben Okri and Nadine Gordimer . . . you name them, I assigned and edited them. My pages determined what the country should be talking about, at any time.



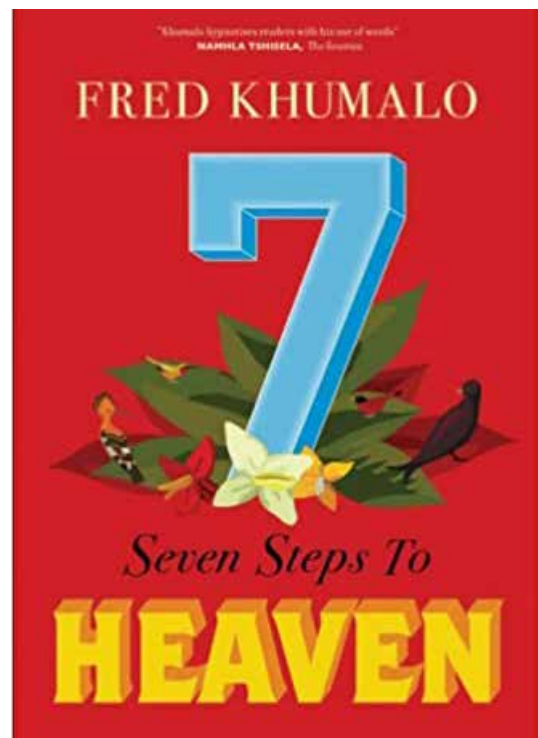
One of the major milestones in my career came in 2011 when I received the coveted Nieman Fellowship. Previous recipients from this country include the likes of Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, Ton Vosloo, Dennis Pather, Barney Mthombothi, Paula Fray, Moeletsi Mbeki and Lizeka Mda. It is the highest accolade in the industry. The Fellow gets to take his or her family to the US where he spends a year at Harvard, studying anything . . . and I mean anything that he can wrap his head around . . . as long as he attends all the required lectures and fulfils all assignments.

In addition to making all these advances in my career, I've always been an avid reader and a practitioner of creative writing. To that effect, in 2006, I published my first two books, *Touch My Blood*, an autobiography, and *Bitches' Brew*, a novel. The novel won the European Union Literary Award, which encouraged me to take creative writing seriously.

I'm no longer employed in the industry, and spend my

time writing books. I've published 12 books altogether. One of these books, *Seven Steps to Heaven*, is a prescribed text for English students at the University of South Africa. Thanks to my books, I've had residencies at numerous institutions, locally and internationally, including the Academy for the Arts of the World in Germany, House of Translators and Foreign Authors in France, Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study and Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study. Always hungry for knowledge and new challenges, I am currently working on my PhD, at the University of Pretoria.

It's been a rewarding journey, and I am glad the thousands of youngsters entering the industry don't have to deal with all the racist bureaucracy that destroyed some of my classmates at Technikon Natal. The struggle we fought was not in vain. As a writer, what I can tell you is this: for as long as there are human beings on earth, journalism will never die. It will mutate, yes, it will move to other platforms, but it will never die. Journalism is about stories. And people cannot survive without stories, because they, themselves, are stories.



**F**red Khumalo is a novelist and short story writer based in Johannesburg. His latest work is *Heart of a Strong Woman*, the best-selling autobiography of Xoliswa Nduneni-Ngema, the co-creator of the hit musical *Sarafina!* Fred's popular novel *Dancing the Death Drill*, based upon the sinking of the SS Mendi during First World War, won the 2019 Humanities and Social Sciences Award. A stage adaptation of it was performed to rave reviews at the Royal Opera House in London, Bergen International Festival in Norway, and Brisbane Arts Festival in Australia. He has been shortlisted twice for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and once for the Short Story Day Africa Award. He has been shortlisted three times for the Miles Morland Scholarship for Writers. Fred holds an MA Creative Writing from Wits University, is a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, and holds fellowships at various institutions. He has suffered for his art: in October 2019, he walked 460 kilometres in 10 days (from Johannesburg to Ladysmith), to commemorate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the march. It is immortalised in his novel *The Longest March*.