# Letter to a Dead Writer: Laurens van der Post

**by** **Jillian Becker** (June 2021)

*Laurens van der Post with Praying Mantis*

**Ah, Laurens! Ah, Great Dreamer!** What a joy, what a relief it must have been when the most ambitious of your dreams came true. Growing up in a dominion of the British Empire, you had dreamed of being a famous writer living in London, and a Knight of the Realm,[1] and in time you really were. Brilliantly achieved, Sir Laurens!

You did it by spinning your dreams into stories that

enchanted thousands of readers. They inspired boys to become heroes in battle and explorers in Africa. They enticed women to venture to the interior of that other world you pioneered for them, the spirit world revealed by dreams. They recommended you to men of a rare sort who retain the soul most have lost in pursuit (so you lamented) of civilization's material comforts and ephemeral pleasures.

Two such men affirmed your mystic wisdom (without eschewing comforts and pleasures). One was the Emperor-in-waiting himself – correctly speaking the man who would in time become the head of what the Empire had become, the British Commonwealth of Nations, the heir to the throne, Prince Charles. He was your disciple. The other was the celebrated shaman, Carl Gustav Jung. To him you were—well, not his disciple but—his fellow seer, I think you would want me to understand.[2]

We first met, you an elderly romantic and I a skeptic in the prime of life, at a small dinner party in 1967, given by our publisher Norah Smallwood to bring her two South African authors together. Our spouses were with us, so I also met your wife Ingaret. Though I was to be many times in your company after that evening, I never saw her again.

The thing that impressed me most about you, the thing I noticed immediately after your comfy well-worn lived-in face, and even before your charm, was your accent. It was unlike the accent of any Afrikaner—or any South African—I had ever heard, except in one respect: you softly rolled your "r"s just as General Smuts did. I knew it to be a speech-characteristic of the Malmesbury district of the Western Cape, where Smuts came from. "So," I concluded, "that's where Laurens van der Post comes from, too." When later I learned that you did not come from Malmesbury but from Philippolis in the Orange Free State, I understood that you had invented your own accent. And why not? Explorers have looked into your life and discovered that you invented much, almost everything,

about yourself. *You* were your own work of art, indeed your masterpiece, designed not to deceive but to entertain, to astonish, to enthrall.

There is a moral difference between bragging and embellishing. To add Huguenots to your family tree[3] was to decorate it, not falsify it. Your ancestry was Dutch, and by adding Huguenots to it you memorialized that grand part of your people's history when the Huguenots merged with the Dutch and helped them in their struggle for South Africa. Their wistful inclusion among your ancestors was an honorable mention, not a boast.

It can only be to your credit that you cared so much what people thought of you. You wanted their love and admiration, not gratuitously, but in return for your giving them *you*—comrade-in-arms, friend, lover, teacher, entertainer, safari-leader, guru—as the best, the most glamorous self that you could. Your improvements to the facts were not made merely to gratify your own vanity. It was not a matter of hoaxing. You spun your tales, surely, out of respect, not disdain, for your hearers and readers. And out of an artist's urge.

In any case, charm such as yours cannot be dissembled. And your talent for storytelling could not be faked. Both were the real thing.

More than any other of your fictitious characters, the heroic "Colonel Laurens van der Post"[4] has delighted multitudes. And however untrue some of the tales you told of your heroism may be, you were in fact, when it mattered, genuinely heroic. There was no need to exaggerate that story of your keeping up the morale of your fellow prisoners in a Japanese prison camp during the Second World War. What you really did was worthy of honor, as a number of them have attested.[5] It even seems to me that your exaggerations dilute the true heroism rather than strengthen it. Yes, you called yourself a colonel when you had not really been raised

to that rank, but for the best of reasons: the suffering men needed a leader to look up to as soldiers, and that's what you gave them. Readers who enjoy your books about that time of strain and terror can see how well you delivered leadership, how it did the men good. You write that you had joined a "distinguished regiment." It should make no difference to those who appreciate what you did if they learn you had actually joined the Military Police.[6]

With tireless effort in your middle-age you planned and replanned your past. And not only your past. Your future too was mapped out with care. Well known though you were, and large as was your circle, you managed with apparent success to keep your friends in segregated sets. It was necessary. You had to keep your wife from knowing about your mistress, and your mistress from knowing about your other mistresses.

Two or three weeks after Norah's dinner party, you phoned to invite me to lunch at a very good restaurant. You told me a story: that you had once been asked to dine with a Japanese gentleman whose house burnt down on that very day, but he, refusing to let the disaster interfere with his plans, entertained you to an excellent dinner on the heap of ashes that had been his home. (Though most of your stories are repeated in your books, I haven't found that one in any that I've read. But I haven't read them all.) Oh, Laurens! I confess now to your ghostly ears, I did not believe you. After all, I too am a writer of fiction as well as fact and I can tell the difference—though I know there is no clean cut between them. In any case, what mattered most was that you enjoyed telling the tale and I enjoyed hearing it.

You did not ask me for a story of mine at that lunch or at any time afterwards. I did not feel slighted. I was flattered that you wanted to entertain me; that you cared to win my admiration and affection.

I was soon to learn what my place was to be, what role

you were assigning to me in your life. Shortly after our first lunch together, I met your mistress at a dinner party you gave at your Chelsea house when Ingaret was away. There were about a dozen guests, so I can't be certain that bringing Frances and me together was the chief purpose of the party, but it might have been. I found myself beside her at dinner. (There were a few more women than men.) And most of the evening we talked to each other.

How did I know she was your mistress? A week or so later, over another lunch, you asked me had I liked her and would I be her friend? You feared she was lonely. Had you told me she was a sculptress? (The feminine ending was still used then.) She'd made a portrait bust of you which was so good you'd donated it to the Johannesburg Art Gallery. And finally you told me something else I'd need to know in order to play my part in your scenario. "The first time I saw Frances," you said, "she was wearing a scarlet dress. There she was—a dark-haired beauty in a long scarlet dress. I fell in love with her."[7]

I was not offended that your chief reason for befriending me was to provide your mistress with a friend. Frances and I . . . we got along. We met quite often at my house in Islington and at hers, which she shared with her mother in St. John's Wood (where the mistresses of London gentlemen traditionally lived, but I supposed that was coincidental). There, I found, she had her studio in a garden flat; there she modelled many portrait busts of you. You gave one of them, I heard, to Prince Charles.

When you moved from your house to a very grand penthouse, I was sometimes among the guests who came in the absence of Ingaret. Frances sat beside you at the dinner table. And I knew without being told that when you came to dinner at my house you would come without your wife and Frances must be there.

If to be friends is to be quite often together, Frances and I were friends. I even spent a holiday with her and her mother (whom I liked very much) in Ibiza. Did you, Laurens, suggest to her that she ask me to join her there? (You told me once that you owned an island in the Mediterranean, that it had been given to you "by a princess." That, too, was a story never repeated as far as I know. If the island existed and was your very own, you must have thought it inferior to Ibiza.)

You made a gift of me to Frances, and I admit that as a gift I was disappointing. It's to your credit that you feared her loneliness. But—honestly, now Laurens—wasn't her loneliness caused by you? She told me she'd asked you whether, if Ingaret died before you, you would marry her, to which you 'd replied, "I never promised you that." Yes, you took her with you on long voyages as husband and wife. You sat in her studio for portrait busts. The voyages, the visits, *and I* were what you gave her. And in the end she was left alone, without family, without children. A friend such as I, had I remained one, could not have made much difference, but you had hoped I would. I don't hold it against you that you tried to be generous to your longest-lasting mistress by bestowing me on her. I took it as a sort of compliment.

Why did Frances and I lose touch with each other? I think it was simply because there wasn't much—other than your wish—to hold us together. On my part, I never made a conscious decision to see less of her. I did not make up my mind to defy your direction of my part in your drama. I did not decide to abandon my role out of sheer contrariness. I was simply distracted from it. My thoughts and time were claimed by the demands of my own life.

You were not happy about it. I think you blamed me. You and I saw less of each other. We met now and then at gatherings of conservatives. You would come up to me to exchange a few words, usually to tell me that you were going

on to visit Frances, as if to remind me that she was still there.

In March, 1989, some four or five years since we had last lunched or dined together, you wrote to me: “I wish we still met as we used to, but perhaps chance will bring it about. But please know you are always remembered, with much love.”

That is the letter I am answering thirty-two years after I received it, twenty-five years after your death. Now I will record a moment when I saw you not as you wanted to be seen. Now that you are long gone, and I am withering, I tell my story.

One evening, while Frances and I were still friends, you showed a small audience, in an upstairs drawing room of the house in St. John’s Wood, the film of a trip you’d made to the Kalahari Desert. It was a place that featured large in your life and works. The books you wrote about your explorations of it, about the Bushmen who live there and the stories they tell, are the ones to which you most owe your fame. The books bred contracts for BBC documentary films, one of which this was.

You knew that I had recently returned from a few weeks in the Kalahari and Namib deserts (which adjoin each other). I’d told you I was going there. You gave me two of your books, *The Lost World of the Kalahari* and *The Heart of the Hunter*—which I didn’t read until long after I was back. (But I did read a government survey of the Bushmen.[8]) When I returned to London, I sent you a description of the marvels I’d seen, particularly in the Namib. I don’t remember what I wrote, but surely would have mentioned my astonishment and delight at finding that its sand is made of crushed semi-precious jewel-stones; that the wind picks up the lighter fragments and sweeps them into heaps as high as dunes, and such a dune can glitter with the color of garnet, amethyst,

agate, citrine, opal, rose-quartz, carnelian, or jasper.

The Kalahari is not barren of vegetation like the Namib. It is more wilderness than desert.

"There were no roads," you said of the Kalahari, as narrator of the film.

But I knew that much of the Kalahari was well supplied with dirt roads, the sort that consist of two parallel tracks cleared on either side of a hump of scrub. At one point in the film such a road was caught by the camera as the Land Rover reversed direction suddenly for the cameraman to get a shot of a running animal.

"We went back on the tracks our own vehicle had made," you said, to explain the tracks.

But no car going over the scrub on rubber tires could possibly have made them. You fibbed because you wanted there to be no roads in *your* desert. You wanted to be the white man who walked where no white man had walked before. Of some small footprints you saw in the sand of the Kalahari at some earlier time you have written in your typical style—beautiful, vague, visionary, evocative, enigmatic: "It was almost as if those footprints were the spoor of my own lost self, vanishing in the violet light of a desert of my own mind."[9]

Again, in the commentary of the film you misinformed us, saying, as best I remember your words: "When the sun reached its zenith at noon, we sheltered in the shade of a mopane tree."

And there was a shot of some of your co-travelers and film-makers sitting or lying in the shade of a tree. It could not, however, have been a mopane tree. That name would sound exotic to a London audience. But I knew—and you knew I knew—that the mopane tree affords no shade at noon. Its leaves are divided like the wings of a butterfly, and like the wings

of a butterfly they fold. At noon they are folded tight and cast shadows as thin as sticks.

I spotted more "mistakes", some of them far more significant than the misnaming of a tree. You showed us few Bushmen, and nothing conveyed the mutual understanding between you and them to which you famously laid claim. You spoke (whether in the film or directly to the gathering in the room I cannot remember) of their religion being centered on the mantis insect as a creator god, and I knew that was not true. I learned later from your books—chiefly *The Heart of the Hunter*— that when the stories about "Mantis," which might seem to be nothing better than childish ramblings,[10] were understood to have the allegorical meanings you expound, they amount to a sophisticated mythology drawn from a storehouse of ancestral wisdom. Furthermore, they wonderfully corroborate certain theories held by you and Jung. The Bushmen being closer to the beginning of human life and so to that storehouse, are more receptive to spiritual enlightenment—more able instinctively to tap into what Jung called the "collective unconscious"—than civilized man with his reliance on reason. You gifted these revelations to the literate world, and they were gratefully received, by Prince Charles in particular. However, the real religion of the Bushmen is something entirely different.[11]

Plainly your purpose in making the film was not to record an actual expedition and its discoveries but to create a new legend about you as an explorer, and you chose to set it in a real desert. Nothing very wrong with that. An artist has license. Self-portraits are allowed to be flattering. But I thought it should trouble you that I would know how much your "documentary" and your expatiations on it were untrue. I was surprised, disturbed, that you saw no need to give me an explanation or excuse, though I was there in the room with you. When we exchanged our good-nights I expected you to say something more, but you said nothing. I searched your face for

a sign of embarrassment, a recognition that I knew you had lied. There was none. I would have accepted any reason you chose to give me, but you gave me none. It did not matter to you what my opinion might be. You disdained it.

Great men, a poet tells us, leave footprints in the sands of time. If yours are vanishing, Laurens, it may be because they must fade in the bright white light of reality, or be swept away by the selective winds of change.

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[1] J.D.F Jones, *Teller of Many Tales: The Lives of Laurens van der Post*, Carroll & Graf, New York, 2001, p.442

[2] Laurens van der Post*, Jung and the Story of Our Time*, Random House, New York, 1977. "[Jung] did not like the idea of having disciples …" p.4. "I seem to have had an inborn predisposition towards the area of meaning in which Jung's abundant spirit, without our knowing, was already embattled." p.7. The book is about the two of them, van der Post and Jung, and the similarity of their visionary ideas, but mostly about van der Post himself.

[3] Jones, p.83

[4] Jones, p.28 ff.

[5] Jones, p.37

[6] Jones, p.

[7] According to Jones (p.299) Laurens met Frances in 1966 in Zurich where she was attending lectures at the Jung Institute. Though this does not necessarily contradict his own account of his first sight of her, it implies a rather different ambience.

[8] George B. Silberbauer, *Report to the Government of Bechuanaland on the Bushman Survey*, Gaberones, 1965.

[9] Jones, p.214

[10] Laurens van der Post, *The Heart of the Hunter*, William Morrow &Co., New York, 1961. In this book, dedicated to Carl Gustav Jung, the author tells Bushman stories, and interprets them as allegories that bear out his own mystic philosophy. He claims in his Introduction to have collected the stories himself, direct from Bushmen in the Kalahari. (Once he gave me an example of what he said was Bushman language, a series of various clicks, but he also told me that he used an interpreter.) He acknowledges using, but only as a confirmatory source, a collection of Bushman stories made in the 19th century by a linguist of extraordinary ability, Wilhelm Bleek, who learned the dialects of several tribes of the San people (Bushmen) from prisoners in Cape Town jails. The labor of collection and translation extended beyond Bleek's lifetime and was completed by his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd. His daughter, Dorothea, compiled an enormous English-Khoisan/Khoisan-English dictionary. The collected stories were published under the title *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, by George Allen and Co, London, 1911. Van der Post used an edition published by Longmans, London, 1914. He also used stories told by Dorothea Bleek in her collection, *Mantis and His Friends*, Maskew Miller S.A., 1923. A 2001 edition of the Bleek and Lloyd collection, titled *The Girl Who Made Stars and Other Bushman Stories,* was published by Daimon Verlag, Einsiedeln, Switzerland, and is in print. Van der Post's English versions of the stories are the same as those in the earlier collections.

[11] Silberbauer, p.95 ff. Two gods are named, one good and one evil. There is no trace of "Mantis".

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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. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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