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Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*: Introduction

South African writer Peter Henry Abrahams was born in Vrededorp, Johannesburg, on March 19, 1919. His father, James Henry Abrahams Deras, was the son of an Ethiopian landowner and his mother, Angelina DuPlessis, a Colored South African, who had two children from a previous marriage. When his father died, Peter was only 4 or 5 years old and he was sent to distant relatives in a rural village because his mother did not earn enough money to take care of him. This was the starting point for a life shaped by a sense of constant movement, instability and leaving behind familiar surroundings.

Abrahams's autobiography, *Tell Freedom*, published in 1954, covers this first period of his life from his first childhood memories shortly before his father's death to the time when he leaves South Africa in 1939. In a chronological sequence of episodes, the reader follows the protagonist on his journey through large parts of the country, from Johannesburg to Cape Town and, finally, to Durban where he boards a ship to England. As a first-person narrator, Peter does not only introduce the readers to his childhood friends Andries or Joseph, to his first girlfriend Anne or to some of the friends who help him along his way, but also to a world full of racism and injustice. In its depiction of social and political circumstances, his narrative becomes more than only an autobiography of one individual. Abrahams rather claims to speak for a whole group of people to form a collective statement as already indicated in the very beginning of the book with the following epigraph:

For
MY MOTHER, MY SISTER, AND ZENA
and all those others who,
in their different ways,
asked me to tell this.

Tell Freedom is arranged in three sections, each dealing with a different phase in Abrahams's life. Book One starts with the earliest memory in the early 1920s as a 4-year-old boy. Soon after these first flashes of remembrance, the small boy is torn from his familiar

surroundings after his father's death: "I remember my mother and father merging into each other in my mind. Together, they were the symbol of peace and laughter and security. Then my father died." (15) What follows is the constant moving from one place to another, from country back to the city, from his aunt and uncle back to his mother and sister and again to yet another aunt. In his early childhood, Peter is confronted with cultural differences, racial prejudices and privileged whites. Asked about these differences, his aunt Liza tells Peter: "'You are Colored. There are three kinds of people: white people, Colored people, and black people. The white people come first, then the Colored people, then the black people.' 'Why?' 'Because it is so.'" (44)

While living with his aunt and uncle in Elsburg, near an Afrikaner village, Peter is introduced to the rural life dictated by the work for white people and has to learn the brutal lesson that, no matter what happens, he must never lift his hand to a white person. Back in Johannesburg, young Peter soon adapts to the life in a slum, follows a gang of other young boys and together they steal and fight other gangs. However, once he is introduced to literature by a Jewish girl at work, Peter longs for education and a new part of his life begins. "I was ripe for something new, the new things my books had revealed, to take the place of the old life." (163)

Book Two of the autobiography deals with his further education that begins with his work at the Bantu Men's Social Center in Johannesburg where he is introduced to important thinkers not only among the South Africans: "Du Bois's words had the impact of a revelation" (193). Especially African American authors of the so-called Harlem Renaissance like Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay shape his consciousness of racial injustice, of the need for change and his wish to become a writer himself. When he is accepted at a missionary college near Pietersburg, Peter leaves his family and his girlfriend behind to seize the chance for a higher education and his way out of the slums of Johannesburg. Soon he is completely absorbed by his studies and becomes a full member of the church after his confirmation and First Communion. But when he starts to measure the Christian ideology of the mission fathers against the world of colour and race that he experiences outside of the somewhat protected setting of college, he decides not to become a teacher and quits college.

Book Three begins in 1938, when Peter is 19 years old. He is back in Johannesburg and comes into contact with Marxist ideology, makes his first white friends and further works on his writing. At that time he already has a reputation as revolutionary poet because *The Bantu World*, a black South African newspaper, has published some of his works by then. For a short time, he even has a relationship with a white woman but they soon break up because

they could never show their love in public. When Peter gets acquainted with members of the black trade union movement, he is impressed by the impact this could have socially and politically: “Here, a new social and political consciousness was in the making. The black man of the past, the peasant, was being turned into a townsman, a modern man who was part and parcel of the highly industrialized world of the present.” (260) He decides to leave Johannesburg and arrives in Cape Town, where he is overwhelmed by the apparent liberality and freedom of movement for non-Europeans. Just like in Johannesburg, he is in touch with people sharing a Marxist ideology but Peter is soon disillusioned by their mere talking about political theory and he plans to not only leave the city again but also to leave South Africa and to head for England. Because of his literary work, the authorities deny him a passport to board a ship and, while thinking of another way to leave the country, Peter helps to build up a school in one of the poorest areas of Cape Town. Although this work seems satisfying, he nevertheless crosses large parts of the country again in his urge for freedom and arrives in Durban where he can finally go on board and leave for England with a clear purpose in mind: “Perhaps life had a meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa. Also, there was the need to write, to *tell freedom*, and for this I needed to be personally free.” (311, emphasis added) The title reappears in one of the last paragraphs and thereby functions as a frame of the whole narrative. Abrahams has freed himself through education from his old life in the slums, from the possible future dictated by humiliating work for white people, from resigning himself to racial injustice.