

A NOVEL

# the power of one

BRYCE COURTENAY

*"The Power of One has everything:  
suspense, the exotic, violence;  
mysticism, psychology and magic;  
schoolboy adventures, drama."*

*—The New York Times*





# CHAPTER ONE

---

This is what happened.

Before my life started properly, I was doing the usual mewling and sucking, which in my case occurred on a pair of huge, soft black breasts. In the African tradition I continued to suckle for my first two and a half years, after which my Zulu wet nurse became my nanny. She was a person made for laughter, warmth, and softness and she would clasp me to her breasts and stroke my golden curls with a hand so large it seemed to palm my whole head. My hurts were soothed with a song about a brave young warrior hunting a lion and a women's song about doing the washing down on the big rock beside the river where, at sunset, the baboons would come out of the hills to drink.

My life proper started at the age of five, when my mother had her nervous breakdown. I was torn from my lovely black nanny with her big white smile and sent to boarding school.

Then began a time of yellow wedges of pumpkin, burnt black and bitter at the edges; mashed potato with glassy lumps; meat aproned with gristle in gray gravy; diced carrots; warm, wet, flatulent cabbage; beds that wet themselves in the morning; and an entirely new sensation called loneliness.

I was the youngest child in the school by two years, and I spoke only English, the infected tongue that had spread like a plague into the sacred land and contaminated the pure, sweet waters of Afrikanerdom.

The Boer War had created great malevolent feelings against the English, who were called *rooineks*. It was a hate that had entered the Afrikaner bloodstream and pocked the hearts and minds of the next generation. To the boys at school, I was the first live example of the congenital hate they carried for my kind.

I spoke the language that had pronounced the sentences that had killed their grandfathers and sent their grandmothers to the world's first



concentration camps, where they had died like flies from dysentery, malaria, and blackwater fever. To the bitter Calvinist farmers, the sins of the fathers had been visited upon the sons, unto the third generation. I was infected.

I had had no previous warning that I was wicked and it came as a fearful surprise. I was blubbing to myself in the little kid's dormitory when suddenly I was dragged from under my horrid camphor-smelling blanket by two eleven-year-olds and taken to the seniors' dormitory to stand trial before the council of war.

My trial, of course, was a travesty of justice. But then, what could I expect? I had been caught deep behind enemy lines and everyone, even a five-year-old, knows this means the death sentence. I stood gibbering, unable to understand the language of the stentorian twelve-year-old judge, or the reason for the hilarity when sentence was passed. But I guessed the worst.

I wasn't quite sure what death was. I knew it was something that happened on the farm in the slaughterhouse to pigs and goats and an occasional heifer. The squeal from the pigs was so awful that I knew it wasn't much of an experience, even for pigs.

And I knew something else for sure; death wasn't as good as life. Now death was about to happen to me before I could really get the hang of life. Trying hard to hold back my tears, I was dragged off.

It must have been a full moon that night because the shower room was bathed in blue light. The stark granite walls of the shower recesses stood sharply angled against the wet cement floor. I had never been in a shower room before, and this place resembled the slaughterhouse on the farm. It even smelled the same, of urine and blue carbolic soap, so I guessed this was where my death would take place.

My eyes were a bit swollen from crying but I could see where the meat hooks were supposed to hang. Each granite slab had a pipe protruding from the wall behind it, with a knob on the end. They would suspend me from one of these and I would be dead, just like the pigs.

I was told to remove my pajamas and to kneel inside the shower recess facing the wall. I looked directly down into the hole in the floor where all the blood would drain away.

I closed my eyes and said a silent, sobbing prayer. My prayer wasn't to God, but to my nanny. It seemed the more urgent thing to do. When she couldn't solve a problem for me, she'd say, "We must ask Inkosi-Inkosikazi, the great medicine man, he will know what to do."



Although we never actually called on the services of the great man, it didn't seem to matter; it was comforting to know he was available when needed.

But it was too late to get a message through to Nanny, much less have her pass it on. I felt a sudden splash on my neck and assumed it was warm blood trickling over my trembling, naked body and across the cold cement floor and into the drain. Funny, I didn't feel dead. But there you go. Who knows what dead feels like?

When the Judge and his council of war had all pissed on me, they left. After a while it got very quiet, just a drip, drip, drip from someplace overhead and a sniff from me that sounded as though it came from somewhere else.

As I had never seen a shower, I didn't know how to turn one on and so had no way of washing myself. I had always been bathed by my nanny in a tin tub in front of the kitchen stove. I'd stand up and she'd soap me all over and Dee and Dum, the two kitchen maids who were twins, would giggle behind their hands when she soaped my little acorn. Sometimes it would just stand right up on its own and everyone would have an extra good giggle. That's how I knew it was special. Just how special, I was soon to find out.

I tried to dry myself with my pajamas, which were wet in patches from lying on the floor, and then I put them back on. I didn't bother to do up the buttons because my hands were shaking a lot. I wandered around that big dark place until I found the small kids' dormitory. There I crept under my blanket and came to the end of my first day in life.

I am unable to report that the second day of my life was much better than the first. Things started to go wrong from the moment I awoke. Kids surrounded my bed, holding their noses and making loud groaning sounds. Let me tell you something, there was plenty to groan about. I smelt worse than a kaffir toilet, worse than the pigs at home. Worse even than both put together.

The kids scattered as a very large person with a smudge of dark hair above her lip entered. It was the same lady who had left me in the dormitory the previous evening. "Good morning, Mevrou!" the kids chorused, each standing stiffly to attention at the foot of his bed.

The large person called Mevrou glared at me. "*Kom!*" she said in a fierce voice. Grabbing me by the ear, she twisted me out of the stinking bed and led me back to the slaughterhouse. With her free



**“Unabashedly uplifting . . . asserts forcefully what all of us would like to believe: that the individual, armed with the spirit of independence—‘the power of one’—can prevail.”**

*—Cleveland Plain Dealer*

**I**n 1939, as Hitler casts his enormous, cruel shadow across the world, the seeds of apartheid take root in South Africa. There, a boy called Peekay is born. His childhood is marked by humiliation and abandonment, yet he vows to survive and conceives heroic dreams—which are nothing compared to what life actually has in store for him. He embarks on an epic journey through a land of tribal superstition and modern prejudice where he will learn the power of words, the power to transform lives, and the power of one.



**“Totally engrossing . . . [presents] the metamorphosis of a most remarkable young man and the almost spiritual influence he has on others . . . Peekay has both humor and a refreshingly earthy touch, and his adventures, at times, are hair-raising in their suspense.”**

*—Los Angeles Times Book Review*

**“Marvelous . . . It is the people of the sun-baked plains of Africa who tug at the heartstrings in this book. . . . [Bryce] Courtenay draws them all with a fierce and violent love.”**

*—The Washington Post Book World*

**“Impressive.”**—*Newsday*

**“A compelling tale.”**—*The Christian Science Monitor*

**A BALLANTINE BOOKS TRADE PAPERBACK**

Cover design: Julie Metz

Cover illustration: boy © Corbis;

landscape © Getty Images



Look for the discussion guide  
and other special features inside.  
[www.thereaderscircle.com](http://www.thereaderscircle.com)

**U.S.A. \$14.95**

ISBN 978-0-345-41005-4 FICTION

