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Tinboektoe toe – The story of a story

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Tinboektoe toe is the story of the Middle Girl (*Middelste Meisiekind*) who undertakes a journey on her magic cart:

*Years ago this girl
after much dreaming and thinking
from tin and zinc and bits of wire
made herself a magic travel cart.*

*A cart that could travel from the north bridge
on the west wind
all the way to the eastern lights
and the tip of the southern cross.*

*Now she travels far and sometimes close by
and brings with her stories from everywhere,
flashes of colour, bits of fragrance
and little shards of the moon.*

This time her travels take her to Timbuktu. During the journey she sends postcards to friends “about each new and strange place and the stories I discover there” (*van elke nuwe vreemde plek en stories wat ek daar ontdek*) and invites them to write back to her.

This is the story of *Tinboektoe toe* (To Timbuktu with a pun on “tin”). It is the story of the origin of an idea; of the gradual

development of this idea over the course of 18 months; of technical hiccups, of play and discovery; of a book that tells many stories – and of so many who played along, co-created, and journeyed with her.

In a previous project called *Tracking creative creatures*, Marli Schoeman – who participated in the schools project – made a travel cart out of scrap metal. I want to use this in a story one day; I immediately thought when I first saw this imaginative piece. The opportunity to do just that was the *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* project and the concomitant challenge of exploring the boundaries of the book. I came up with the idea of someone going on a journey in this wonderful flying machine, of photographs and road maps – of a possible story ... The idea of relating the story through postcards gradually took hold of me. Marli Schoeman agreed that I could use her cart and was also willing to play the role of my model.

The photographs were taken over the course of five months – most of these on the same spot on the edge of the Mooi River – and with each session I found myself noticing more and more details:

reflections in the water, moss on a tree trunk, silken thistles among the grasses. To make the postcards I learnt how to use Photoshop, playing while discovering many possibilities, and in the process also refined the ideas for the story.

The different parts of each postcard: the front and back, the place and the stamp, as well as the message from MM (Middle Girl/*Middelste Meisiekind*) are all interconnected. The hand-written messages are bits of story as well as impressions of the journey. For these stories I ransacked our collective treasure chest of stories – fairy tales and folktales from divergent traditions, historical events, Bible stories – and played with words, images, rhyme, sound and rhythm. Together all these become part of a greater story.

Middle Girl (*Middelste Meisiekind*) embarks on her journey from the North Bridge (*Noorderbrug*) at the Mooi River. During her journey of seven weeks she travels further and also higher up: Eersterivier, Tweebosch, Drieankerbaai, Vierfontein, Vyfhoek, Sesmyspruit and Seweweekspoort. From the stamps of the postcards one can see where she is at that moment.

I designed the stamps and my mother, Mossie Greyling, made the handles that go with these. The stamp of Drieankerbaai, for example, shows an anchor motif and the handle is a rusted doorknob.

After searching high and low for a suitable printing company, I had the set of postcards printed, added the addresses and stamped them, and mailed these over a period of nine weeks at the Noordbrug Post Office. The receivers of the postcards, approximately twenty in number, were between 5 and 75 years of age. Come, play along, I urged them; write to Middle Girl.

The idea was that each of them would receive a stack of around three or four postcards each week, and that they also had to write back every week. A strike by the Post Office, however, jammed the sequence of the cards – in every way. Postcards either piled up or were lost, and the sequence and momentum of the correspondence were deranged. Notwithstanding these problems, the receivers helped to build the story and mailed their postcards to MG's postal address at Noordbrug. As MG was out and about on her travels, she did not answer these postcards ...

I was one of the correspondents. My postcards to MG were a series of photographs of reflections in the Mooi River, and were in themselves a type of reflection. On the first card I contemplated the possible reactions of the receivers of the postcards:

Middle Girl

Do you know what I wonder?

I wonder what each of your

friends will notice when they look and read.

Will they write about things like travelling or stories;

*about your magic cart,
about being (middle) human;
about place or space or about the
borders of the spirit land?*

*Will they write about here and now,
or perhaps about maybe and yet?*

What shall they do?

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From Eersterivier MG sent three postcards. On the first one MG is seen seated in her magic cart and she looks at a tree trunk that lies across a river to make a natural bridge:

*At this bridge I find I cannot cross
because underneath sits a troll
who is so terribly ugly
that all the little antelopes are
frightened
leave a dropping
and run away with tails erect.*

On the next card a small figure and cart are seen diving into the water:

*So then I made another plan
and took a dive into the water
and this is actually how my travels
to Timbuktu began.*

The following quotations give an indication of the divergent reactions generated by these cards:

Henrico Greyling (8) asks:

*Did the troll do something to you? Didn't
you throw a stone at him? If I were you, I
would surely have chased him away. That
thing you have, can it swim in the water?*

His twin brother Hendré offers this advice:
What does the troll look like, he has long

*ears, a tiny flat nose, you tell me. My dad is in
the police, call him and if you don't have his
number, ask me. It is 08295013761.*

Sixteen year-old Christiaan Rossouw offers a sober retort:

*You jumped into the river because you
wanted to cross it. But how do you know
that it isn't full of crocodiles and hippos.*

*What I also want to know is what is a "troll"?
Is it a fly, a blowfly ... or perhaps a dead thing?*

Magde-Mari Greeff (18) also had a plan:

*You had to, yes, had
to cross the bridge, you
only had to wear
your dark glasses so
that you could
overlook the troll then
you would show the
antelopes how it
is done.*

Almarie Cilliers (who drew her postcards), wrote:

*Here in the city things are also going troll-shaped.
But one may not talk of the troll. He pays for your
hard work and sleepless nights and stuffs your belly
with American fare. All you can do is to sit on your
mouth. So all I do now is to run with the antelopes
and I imagine myself travelling with you to Timbuk.*

From Kenya Anneretha Combrink wrote:

Dear MG

*Sorry I did not know about your hassles on that
bridge earlier, on your way to Timbuktu. I often
have a snot-cup full of tea at the gruesome troll (he
is actually obsessed with hygiene and has a phobia of
antelopes). In the meantime,*

*I discovered a tribe over here that carries elephants
and antelopes in their ears. I'm in Kenya now.
But not for long. See you where the sun rises. A*

Rhea Koch:

*Hi Middle Girl
One cannot wait for ever for a third ram of roebuck.
Sometimes the plan is yours to make.
Regards, Rhea.*

Gerrit Jordaan:

*First river / Eerste rivier
I'm looking for a snorkel
so I can shove myself head and shoulders
into your story*

Prof Dewy de Wet (the oldest correspondent) notes that:

*Who says the troll wasn't afraid of MG? He seems
quite at ease.
The fear is MG's, not the troll's.
Luckily MG is not an antelope and she crosses the river
to first river / eerste-rivier*

I thought long and hard over the best binding technique to use and discussed possibilities with a number of people

before I finally decided on a simpler solution, namely to use tins as containers. For the friends' postcards I rummaged for a colourful variety of tins that suited each of them. MM's collection of 30 postcards and seven postal stamps fit into a three-layered tin that links with the magic cart in terms of appearance and material. The steel container was designed by Mossie and Franci Greyling and made by Hans Grobler. I applied parts of the title onto the different layers of the tin to give it an ambivalent meaning: *TIN BOEK TOE TOE* – translatable as both the journey to Timbuktu and the (tin) book is closed. This container and the tins of the correspondents are displayed at short distances from each other so that the visitor has to journey from one to the other and, in the process of handling and reading, can construct his or her own story.

On the penultimate postcard Middle Girl is back from her journey and she sits in a wheelchair at the edge of the Mooi River. A sharp-eyed viewer may notice that the water level has dropped and the seasons have changed – and MG has only progressed a bit from the place where she first took the plunge into the river. On her wheelchair

a small image of a diving figure can be seen. It is through stories and through the imagination that her travels took her ... and why so many travelled with.

