

# Illicit love pursued in disgraceful times

The Classifier haunted Wessel Ebersohn, and he spent 30 years trying to write it in a satisfactory way, writes Sue Grant-Marshall

**W**ESSEL Ebersohn towers above everybody else at nearly 2m tall; the slim giant's twinkling blue eyes match a ready smile. That smile was less available during apartheid, when he and his family were harassed by the security police, as he pounded out his epoch-defining novels.

Back in the 1970s, he wrote about the death of Steve Biko in *Store Up The Anger*. *Divide the Night* was about a small shopkeeper who shot eight, mainly black, people dead. The case is investigated by Yudel Gordon, Ebersohn's prison psychiatrist hero.

This character lives on in the author's recent thrillers, but his latest book, *The Classifier*, is quite different from the others. It's a lyrical story of teenage love across the 1970s colour bar.

The violence is never physically manifested as it is in many of Ebersohn's other works. Instead, it seethes in the confused and anxious hearts and minds of the teenagers' families. The boy, Chris, lives with his family in the white suburb of Red Hill, while Ruthie lives with her coloured one on the opposite slopes of the Durban North valley. As they meet, their love hidden in the tall sugar cane fields, they try to ignore the horrid realities of life around them. The taciturn, Afrikaner father who Chris half loves, half hates, talks to his small children of the important work he does for the government without ever specifying its nature.

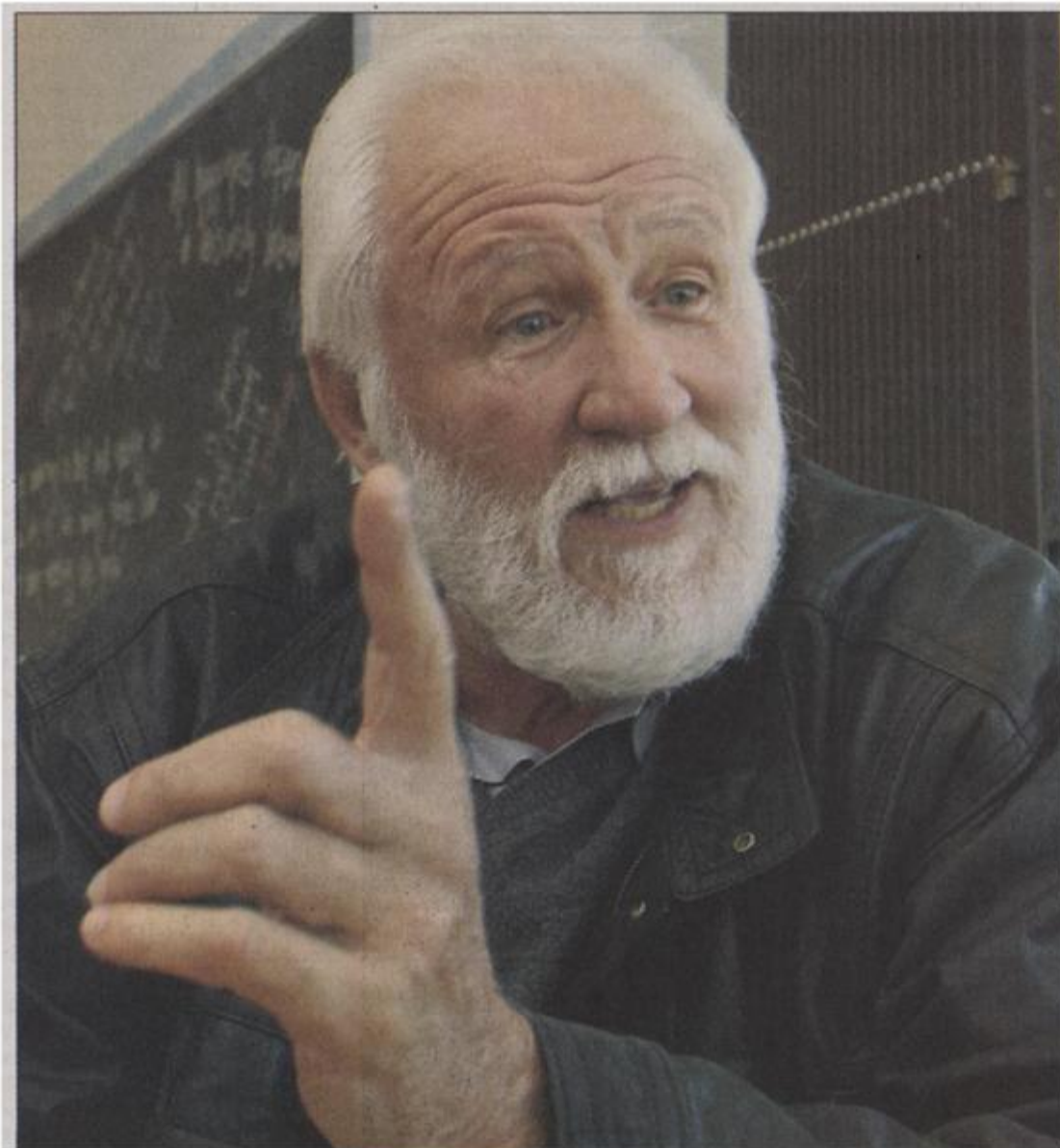
It's only when Chris is older that his father decides, due to a growing sense of unease about his son's after-school activities, to take him to work in his office during school holidays.

There the youngster, in spite of his father's best efforts to keep doors closed, overhears snatches of conversations and glimpses babies being stripped of their clothing by their terrified white, single mothers.

His father's finger points to a dark spot at the base of an infant spine, "the so-called Mongolian spot that supposedly indicated the father was not white", observes Ebersohn.

Tiny noses can tell the classifier if the father is black, while a baby's eyes indicate possible Chinese heritage.

"There was nothing scientific about their methods, it was absolute nonsense," snorts Ebersohn. In this novel he takes us into the inner workings of apartheid's core and lays bare



**BOLD:** Author Wessel Ebersohn has never allowed intimidation to affect his writing. Picture: MARTIN RHODES

the fears that wrought its existence. Most of the story occurs between the 1974 Mozambican revolution and the student riots of 1976, although there's a modern twist to it.

Chris sees the processing of Portuguese refugees as they are divided into those white enough to remain in SA and the dark ones, who are forced to board ships to Brazil. He slips in and out of Ruthie Peterson's female-headed coloured household, still not realising their love could land them in reformatories, and jail if they were older.

Ma Peterson is appalled and fearful but cannot end their relationship in the face of Ruthie's passionate entreaties. She decides home-chaperoned meetings are safer than the cane fields. At one stage, the entrepreneurial Chris meets Ma Peterson's businessman brother. He lives in a splendid house and manages the grandest hotel on the Durban coastline. He is

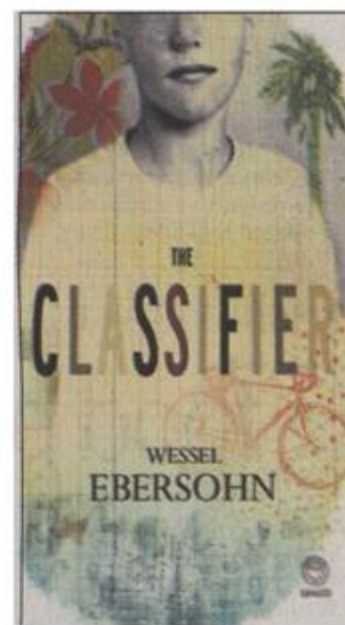
white. In time there are consequences.

The book is written with the tension Ebersohn creates in his thrillers but the forbidden love and family heartbreak is crafted with a nuanced sensitivity that makes it riveting. "This is my best book yet. I've worked harder on it than any other and I'm just getting into my stride now as an author," he declares.

**“ Tiny noses can tell the classifier if the father is black, while a baby's eyes indicate possible Chinese heritage**

At 70, he has spent 30 years struggling to fashion a novel that would satisfy him.

Many of his other 10 internationally published books



covered it with leaves. The next morning, Ebersohn strolled down to check on their handiwork. A gaping hole greeted him. Neighbours, asked by the police to spy on them, had done as they were bidden.

The Ebersohn family's life became almost as dramatic as the writer's books. Their phone was tapped. The police openly called their young children to ask about bus routes and the whereabouts of their parents.

Ebersohn, desperately trying to finish his novel about Biko's death, while *The Classifier* bubbled in his imagination, went into hiding. He wrote the final 100 pages of *Store Up The Anger* by gaslight in 10 days in the half-built house of a friend.

Miriam was nabbed by the police, who interrogated her for a day. They warned they could hold her for 180 days without having to charge her.

His book, *Anger*, was smuggled out of the country to UK publishers Gollancz, but had "the distinction of being banned

before being published here", says Ebersohn.

The banning order was overturned by the Publications Control Board. So the government banned the cover. A second cover was also banned and eventually, in desperation, Ravan Press produced a blank cover with just the title and Ebersohn's name.

It is little wonder, given the tension and harassment at the time, that Ebersohn couldn't complete *The Classifier*. Eventually he tore up his 400-page manuscript.

The couple fled Joburg in 1986, dropping out for six years to live in a woodcutter's cottage in the Knysna forest. They returned "when the new SA arrived" to start their magazine, *Succeed*, for budding entrepreneurs in the hope that new businesses would create vital new jobs.

Today, it's one of the most successful magazines of its kind in the country and their two daughters and a granddaughter work with them. There was a 14-year interregnum without a book before *Within Touching Distance*, a thriller, emerged in 2004. Now it takes Ebersohn just six months to pound out books that reflect, grippingly, the times in which we live. But, *The Classifier* haunted him. He rewrote it countless times.

I've read nearly all his books. This tale of young love in apartheid grimness is worth every last word.

But, Ebersohn contends, race classification still exists, albeit more mildly, and it appears in modern guise in this book.

"I wrote about racism in the past and will continue to do so today. I've never allowed intimidation to influence my writing."