

Unlikeable Mr. Roberts loses an

Controversial Mbeki biographer accused of being a racist, bullying intellectual thief — by a former close friend

ANDREW DONALDSON

IT WAS the end of a beautiful friendship — and now all is ugly and full of rancour.

Ronald Suresh Roberts and Anthony Brink were two controversial peeps in the Aids denialism pod.

The former — thanks to his failed attempt to sue the Sunday Times for a story published under the headline "The unlikeable Mr Roberts", his highly publicised spats with politicians and commentators, and his controversial biography of the President, *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki* — is the better known figure.

But it is Brink who has been more influential — at least as far as the President's thinking on HIV/Aids is concerned.

It was advocate and activist Brink's views on Aids that were responsible for Mbeki questioning conventional wisdom on the causes and effects of HIV and its treatment.

Now Brink has accused his former chum of plagiarising chunks of his unpublished work, *Just Say Yes, Mr President: Fit to Govern*.

It has been reported that Roberts may face criminal charges in this regard. As it is, Rosewarren Vally, who published Roberts's hagiography, has apparently halted a second printing of *Fit to Govern* until he gets what The Weekend yesterday reported as "considered legal advice or directions from a court".

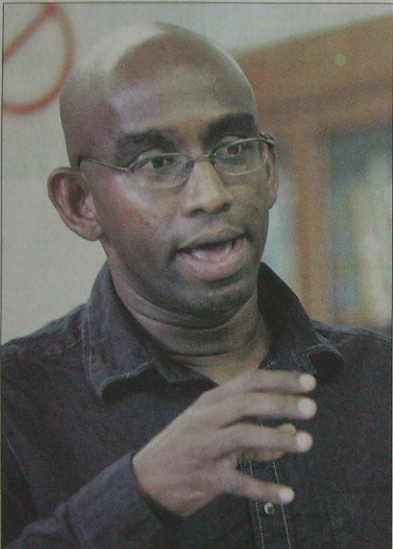
But Roberts brushed off the suggestion. "Yeah, just like his attempt to put Zackie Achmat on trial in The Hague."

Brink's charges are also sure to embarrass Absa Bank, which, along with other corporations, stumped up at least R1.6-million to publish *Fit to Govern*.

Fit to Govern was trumpeted as a key tool in Mbeki's attempts to jockey for position against rival, Jacob Zuma in the ANC succession battle.

Widely derided for its sycophancy, the book nevertheless allowed Mbeki — through Roberts, under the watchful eye of Minister in the Presidency Essop Pahad — to deal with his many critics, imagined or otherwise.

None of those mentioned in the book, however, may have been more surprised at being singled out for scorn in its pages than Brink. His sense of betrayal — as portrayed in a 376-page riposte, *Lying and Thieving: The fraudulent schol-*



FIT TO GOVERN: Controversial Thabo Mbeki biographer Ronald Suresh Roberts
Picture: ANTONIO MUCHAVE/SOWETAN

arship of Ronald Suresh Roberts in *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki* with reference to chapters 8 and 9 on AIDS: "A clash of fundamentalisms 1: medical politics" and "A clash of fundamentalisms 2: racial politics" — is palpable.

In it, Brink writes of their meeting in a bookshop in Kloof Street, Cape Town, in April 2005.

"They hit it off immediately — and soon afterwards went to Brink's flat, where he gave Roberts digital copies of his books and, notably, his mag-

nium opus in progress, *Just Say Yes, Mr President*. Brink says he intends to publish it in 2009.

In *Lying and Thieving*, he writes: "Roberts got to know something of my political and ideological perspectives during our friendship; a profound spiritual and moral disaffection with Western industrial culture and values; an intense antipathy for corporate capital in all its reaches; a heart-and-soul identification with and support for the government's political, social and economic transformation project; and a seething

loathing and contempt for the reactionary South African white English-speaking liberal establishment and its newspapers (unlike Roberts who buys and reads the papers every day, I can scarcely bear to touch them — beyond a glance at one in a café — lest their mediocrity, their meanness and their ideologically stagnant stench somehow rub off on my hands and spoil my next hour or two; I get my news elsewhere)."

By all accounts, it was a good friendship.

The traffic of e-mails between the two was "dense", Brink "carefully" proofread Roberts's biography of Nadine Gordimer, *No Cold Kitchen*.

Roberts, in turn, described Brink's work (to him) as "brilliant, F***ing brilliant."

There were evenings at jazz clubs, long nights at restaurants, cocktail parties with controversial lawyer Christine Qunta.

According to Brink, it was a relationship in which Roberts would call him up at all hours of the day, and request meetings at any of the coffee bars close to their apartments.

Garnt discussion upon earnest discussion.

They lent each other books.

"You're such a good friend," Roberts once confided to Brink.

Then — Roberts began copying his work, Brink claims. Roberts showed him the draft of the Aids chapter of his book.

It was, Brink felt, remarkably familiar to his own style.

"That's how I write," he told Roberts, "not you."

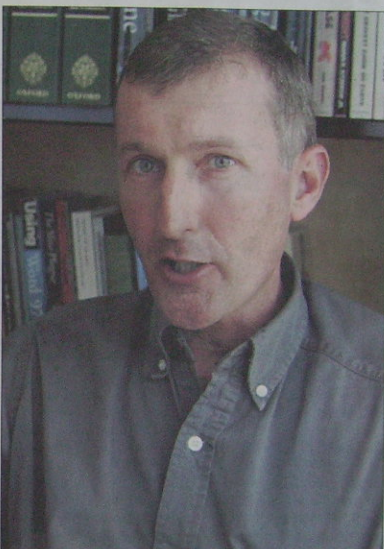
But Brink agreed and added, "I can't help it, your writing's infectious."

But this account, says Roberts, is "loony fiction. I certainly do not write like he does!"

But this was a friendship between the two of them.

"Crab. Period. Crab. Crab. The guy admits in his own book that he took secret notes from my private Mbeki letter while I was in the loo. A friend won't do that."

Roberts says he "talked to him and listened to his views and I did it sceptically."



LYING AND THIEVING: Aids denialist and, he says, wronged author Anthony Brink
Picture: AMEROSSE PETERS

the many books he has lent him. Those long evenings at restaurants? Well, Roberts always had to bully the waiters; it was "an awful aspect" of dining out with the man.

"It was the strangest thing," Brink writes, "this compulsion to degrade and humiliate for his evening to be complete."

Roberts said anyone could "go to any restaurant acknowledged in my book and ask them."

The way Roberts held forth at a cocktail party with Qunta about Aids being deployed as an ideology of

upturn, white-owned coffee shops.

"His knowledge of vermacular is limited to 'Call the manager'."

Worse, Brink suggests that Roberts will sleep only with white women because he sincerely believes black women are infected with the "sex-death virus."

As he puts it: "Like nearly all whites who read the newspapers and watch TV, Roberts fervently believes that you can die about a decade after making love with a woman without a condom, especially an African woman, because he thinks women, particularly African women, harbour death in the form of miniature invisible demons in the place most guys like being most."

"Roberts really believes this. "Indeed, at lunch with a lady friend of mine earlier this year, he blurted neurotically when she mentioned me: 'He doesn't use condoms!' As if that was the ultimate token of my lunacy."

It seems likely that Roberts's alarm was heightened by the fact that she's black, because he doesn't believe white women spread Aids; it's all the blacks who do.

"This is Mbeki's intellectual bugbear."

Roberts said it was important to note that Brink was not purporting to quote him and was making his own false assumptions.

"This is completely mad. It's most outrageous. It makes me out as a racist in a personal aspect of my life. It's a breach of my privacy. I have gone out with a long string of black women."

"Because I said Aids is in part due to poverty, he deduced that it means Roberts is saying it's more risky to sleep with poor women and because most poor women are black, he deduced that I didn't want to sleep with black women. That's not what I said. "It's comical and false. What's the public interest in this?"

Two hours after it began, the friendship ended. Abruptly.

Roberts and Brink were about to enter a restaurant when the former suggested there might be photographers about.

It was clear that Roberts didn't want to be seen with Brink. The feeling was mutual.

Roberts was interviewed by Heriëtte Geldenhuys