

Witty with a dash of sweet acid

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Free Association by Steven Boykey Sidley, Picador Africa

Steven Boykey Sidley's fourth novel, *Free Association*, is quite simply brilliant. It also has its finger pulsing on the heart of all that is topical – opening up the world of podcasts, and the zeitgeist of topics explored in them, in a way that is engaging, funny, relevant, and, of course, entertaining. It's also thought-provoking. I'm rapidly using up some powerful adjectives – and I haven't even told you what the story is about.

All this from one novel?

Well, yes...

And I knew I was in for a very special read when I attended the launch of the book at Hyde Park Exclusive Books. Instead of a reading by the author or a Q&A session, Sidley chose to have actor Ter Hollmann read the first chapter of the novel. Hollmann's reading was fun, engaging, and engaged. He made the main character of *Free Association* come alive: Max Lurie, a "navel-gazing" podcaster working and living in Los Angeles. While author Sidley is South African, and currently makes his home in Johannesburg, he has also lived in the US.

A thirtysomething failed psychologist and novelist, podcaster Max finds that his weekly musings on his podcast, called *Free Association*, tap into a collective nerve. His ratings keep climbing, although he can't quite figure out why or believe his luck. Lurie's voice is wryly simple, sometimes tongue-in-cheek, always this side of witty:

"Today, my loyal audience, is the one-year anniversary of this podcast. This started as a lark because the universe decided I was a failure as a novelist, and podcasting seemed like a way to escape a life of bitterness and regret. Which is certain to happen at some point ..."

The book is divided into these podcasts, in which Max gives free reign to all that is happening and isn't happening in his life. These are interspersed with chapters in the third person, in which the real Max emerges, more or less. It is through the chapters detailing Max's life that we uncover the truths, half-truths and downright lies mashed up as part of his podcasts.

When his mother phones him to tell him he'd better visit his dying father, she also chastises him for lying in his podcasts about having a twin brother, Frank, living in London. But it's an amusing device: Max using this twin brother as a bouncing ball, a foil to his own failures. In reality, Max has a sister, Delphine, who's a social oddball, but likeable and endearing. But part of the fun in reading this layered novel is in contrasting the truths of Max's life and his imagined world, presented to his audience.

Take his imaginary girlfriend, Anne, who comes alive through his broadcasting, when in fact Max is entering a long, dry spell of celibacy:

"He was going on a year without sex. No man or woman in their early thirties should have to go a year without sex. He imagined that all around him in apartments, hotels, cars, jacuzzis, on desks, pool tables and love-seats, in closets and wine cellars and airplane toilets there were great bouts of heaving and groaning, the air moist with desire and urgency." But she values her privacy, does Anne, and even though he's not meant to talk about her, he can't quite help himself.

Max's voice is so dry, so droll, and so delightfully funny, that he is easily conjured up in your mind's eye, telling his listeners what his religious twin brother Frank advises: having faith is one such piece of advice, which results in hilarious Woody Allen type existentialist banter:

"I said – why do I need faith?
 He said – if you have no faith, what's the point?
 I said – I never said there is a point. There is no point. That's the point.
 He said – how can you live like that?
 I said – I live in great confusion.
 He said – you see?
 I said – no. I don't. How can you live with all that certainty?"

But Anne's days are numbered when he meets Roxanne, a bright, twenty-something woman whom Max fantasises about. Of course, he brings his listeners into the conversation, asking them if he should go for this new relationship and ditch Anne. Part of the fun of the podcasts are the listener's reactions to his life and their own advice to him.

Some South African flavour is provided in the witty character of his producer, Bongani Maposa, an immigrant who tells Max that he should focus less on himself and more on others, that he should be less self-obsessed and peer beyond his horizons from time to time. Bongani is a delightful, almost phlegmatic contrast to the neurotic Max.

But beyond the humour and the entertainment, there is the man beneath the vulnerabilities. A deepening occurs as the novel progresses – and Max finds his way into a relationship with Roxanne, befriends a homeless man, visits his father, and comes across a surprising new side to his sister's dour professor husband. He also studies online, all in the interests of podcast research of course, looping from learning about the deep web, and Gnosticism, to how to buy a gun.

Sidley's assured witty touch, laced with sweet acid, moves the novel along – keeping it rolling in wit and the neurotic exchanges and thoughts that are the bedrock of Max's outlook on life. This is a deeply likeable protagonist as well as a deeply flawed one, and who isn't? That's the charm of it too. This is a deeply delightful, funny and clever book. It presents a portrait of a man at a certain point in his life – feeling old already, even at only thirty-three, adrift and confused in this new digital world. A careful unpeeling of Max takes place, an exposure of his own vulnerability, which opens him up further.

At the end of *Free Association*, you'll be itching to start listening to the range of podcast voices now available – if you haven't already.

But you'll also, I'm sure, be sorry to say goodbye to Max and his podcasts as he himself tunes in to new adventures.