

The stranger at the gate

Author: Fiona Melrose

It's ambitious, to call your novel Johannesburg, for there are as many versions of this city as there are novels about it. And yet it's what initially attracted me to this book, and to attend a talk at the South African Book Fair titled Johannesburg: A love story last month. With novelist Niq Mhlongo quizzing several writers about their literary and visceral responses to this city they call home, it included Fiona Melrose as well as Ivan Vladislavić and Harry Kalmer. There is no one singular experience of this city – Melrose spoke about how, as a woman, you are necessarily more careful than a man, there are other threats and that, "You move your body differently in the city, depending on whether you have a car or you're a pedestrian."

Vladislavić perceptively pointed out that, "Your experience of this place is dependent on money, how much you have, where you're living – all of this affects the dynamics of living here." Kalmer added that the city is in constant change, "The city is in constant change. The Yeoville I lived in twenty, thirty years ago is very different to today."

And so, to Melrose's novel, Johannesburg, which presents another version of this city I also call home. What also attracted me to this read was that it is set on December 6 2013: it was that evening that it was announced that Mandela had passed on. The days following his death and the country's mourning remain bright, clear points in memory, iconic moments in history.

This novel is set in Houghton, near to the Mandela residence, (the Residence). It's a multi-narrative story too, so we follow several characters as they navigate December 6. In homage and a reworking of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, the story is set over a single day, from early morning to night, as preparations for a party are underway.

The novel opens with artist Gin Brandt (Virginia), just home from New York where she lives, having spent nearly two decades there. She's home to celebrate her mother, Neve's 80th birthday by throwing her a party, a party the matriarch doesn't want.

Gin is a stranger to this new Johannesburg: a place where beggars stand at robots, and the landscape changes daily. Her white guilt surges forward as she surveys the scene from her car window: "Gin overtook a wagon and felt the pull of guilt in her stomach. She slowed at the next traffic light and stopped, shaking her head at three men offering pamphlets for cheap 'leather look' furniture, sex clinics and a new shoe warehouse, and then the beggar too with his blind friend who shuffled along next to him, guilt bait. A mother with a baby. Another child. So she rolled down the window and dropped some coins from her jacket pocket into the tin cup for the blind man's friend. And they clattered like gun fire as they fell."

Gin is calcified by her own demons is not an easy character to like; neither is her mother, equally calcified, wondering at this child of hers – their unease with each other the backbone of their relationship.

Much softer, and more sympathetically drawn are Mercy, the domestic worker in the home, who has been there for years. Also sympathetically drawn is Dudu, a domestic worker in another of the Houghton home. She is a sweet woman burdened by her own guilt and sense of loyalty. And swirling through this vortex is the fully realised character of September, Duduzile's deformed brother. Duduzile both looks after him, as she has her whole life, and more so after Verloren. In echoes of the Marikana massacre, September was injured in a fictional mining fracas at Verloren. Now dealing not only with his physical disability, but voices and derangement, he begs on a street corner and September makes for an intriguing character. Melrose's sympathetic and incisive look at him brings him closely to life and evokes our empathy.

There are other voices: there is Peter, the lawyer and Gin's old beau, still hoping that Gin's hard exterior might crack and finally let him in. Even the pampered pooch Juni make an appearance and we hear her voice too – which makes for charming writing.

As tensions build, Johannesburg's stormy weather, with its cloying heat before a storm, runs through the narrative and is a

perfect foil to the tension beneath the action. From speculation that Mandela had passed, to Neve and Gin's discomfort with each other and in themselves, as well as September's increasingly delusional ravings.

And through it all Melrose paints a portrait of the city, and it is in the many descriptions that Johannesburg springs to life in all its glare. A city that is experienced differently by each character.

As seen by Gin it's a harsh place that matches her own disappointed, needy mood and character: "Gin could feel a rage building. It needed no origin. ... This was a rage that she associated with Johannesburg. She only felt it here. ... Johannesburg was the practised master of the endless hustle. It was built on gold. The wheelers, the dealers, the pioneer, frontier town it was always going to be. The drivers, the pedestrians, the constant tap tap tapping on your car window from hawkers and beggars and chancers feigning hunger and destitution and misery, exposed by the headphones and sneakers they wore and by strapping lumps of paper to their backs because a hump means money, and a limp or bent-back sloping shuffle even more. It never changed. The assault of demands."

Contrast this with a description of September's: "September had his bread and milk. He stood outside the store and looked up to the sun. The sky began to crease under his gaze. He knew that under it, the city was ripening - its flesh softening and warming. Soon its pulp could be pressed with even the most unwilling thumb. And later, of course, the flies. The king is dead. Long live the king."

And yet, as the day ends, we come closer to understanding Gin, to feeling sympathy for this woman as events unfold, and the true mourning begins.

Johannesburg is a daring novel, and an intriguing one, playing out a day in the lives of South Africans against the broader panorama of the country's historical events. And it is also a successful novel – one that invites questions and engagement. At the launch of her novel a few days after the book fair, Melrose commented, "Activism is not without consequence. I'm asking: what is our obligation to the stranger at the gate?"

Whatever the answer, if indeed there is an answer, Johannesburg provides a canvas on which to question and explore it.