

*The House on Sugarbush Road*

by Méira Cook

Winnipeg: Enfield & Wizenty, 2012, ISBN 978-1-926531-30-4, 311 pp., \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

This is the book Méira Cook's many fans have been anticipating ever since Cook emigrated to Manitoba from South Africa, where she had a career as a journalist. The novel is not autobiographical, but the lives she describes are clearly ones she knows very well.

*The House on Sugarbush Road* opens with a description of the shantytown where the protagonist, Beauty, was raised by Mamma Thlali:

Time passed as slowly as a cloud picking over the uneven stubble of the veld grasses. Outside, the sky was a hard-edged, thick blue. The sky was an upturned plastic bowl trapping the shantytown. Tick tick tick, the landscape contracted beneath this sky, tick tick tick, like a tin roof expanding in the midday sun, like the rattle of sparrow claws on gravel. All day Beauty crouched watching a flinching square of light fall through the window, inch down the wall, across the floor and up the opposite wall.

Then it was night. (9)

Cook doesn't describe so much as allude to the poverty in the place, giving an impressionistic view of the monotony of a life lived under a tin roof.

The actual house on Sugarbush Road is owned by the ouma (grandmother) of Benjamin, a gay doctor. The story takes place in Johannesburg, capital of South Africa, following the victory of the African National Congress. As the white South Afrikaners have fled, they've left Johannesburg to the blacks and coloureds who once formed the two parallel government cabinets but to whom little power was granted. As such, the immediate effect of this white desertion is a rise in violence and decay:

Johannesburg, Johannesburg – there were more women raped in this city than anywhere else in the world, in the *planet* even! More children abducted, more virgins despoiled, more fatal road accidents, higher casualties, less medical staff, and the highest rate of qualified paramedical attrition in the world! But for all his cynicism Markham, senior surgical resident and staff consultant at the Gen remained, like Benjamin, at his state-funded post, too weary from his days of surgery and shift, intake and rounds, to leave. And all about them the city writhed and coiled. (21–2)

Although Beauty and Benjamin are the central characters, the story's plot depends upon their interaction with several others. One is Beauty's grandson, Rothman, who

needed a house, a home mind you, not a tin lean-to, stolen sheet iron held down with rocks for a roof. Maybe a tire or two for a lightning conductor. No, assuredly, her grandson deserved to grow up in a house with brick walls, taps that could be turned on and off, a front door that opened wide to welcome visitors, yes, but that could be locked up smartly against the skelms of the night, also. (83)

Beauty is employed as a servant by Benjamin's ouma. Her younger daughter was recently caught in a crossfire between the police and armed demonstrators and was killed. Beauty's attitude toward her employers has been tarnished by this tragic event. She demonstrates her resentment in a passive-aggressive way by doing little annoying things such as making excessive noise when Benjamin is trying to sleep or study. She dreams of having her own house, and in order to gather together enough money to make this dream a reality, she steals small amounts from the household and from Benjamin's pockets, which she deposits with a broker who she hopes isn't in turn stealing the money from her.

Then there is Gcina Mopede, "the tall Shona from across the border. For how many ways were there to name a woman immoral, indecent, and prone to stray? As they said in Sepedi, she had the blood of *makwerekwere* running through her veins; as the Sotho exclaimed, that *skaberash!* But in the Cape she was a *jentoe*, a *goose*, a *toit*. If a woman was suspected of being unfaithful the Afrikaners called her a *lossie* which was just another word for letakatse, prostitute, izifebe, whore" (132). This is an incredible passage, with the reader becoming immersed in a melange of the languages that flavour the Johannesburg stew. Mopede is the mother of Dhlamina, and her father is Hosiah Mopede, Beauty's second husband. As such, Beauty is Dhlamina's stepmother. Their paths cross towards the end of the novel. Dhlamina has inherited Gcina's looks, which attract men like locusts to a crop and have led, at the time we meet Dhlamina, to two houses being burnt down by men who could not possess her.

Dhlamina has become pregnant by Madiba Mhda, who is known as the Taxi Man. He has his hands in just about every aspect of Johannesburg life. He runs a fleet of taxis that are always at war with other taxi companies, resulting in the murder of his drivers and the bombing of his cabs. He owns a brother or two. He also owns a series of food kiosks whose supervisor is Benjamin's lover Mustapha, also known as Mr. Fa.

This complex cast of characters comes together at the end. The all-powerful union has called a general strike in Johannesburg, and so when Dhlamina's water breaks, she is forced to wander the streets trying to find a taxi to get to the hospital. Mhda is badly injured when his taxi is blown up. By chance they encounter Mustapha, who commandeers a vehicle and gets them to the hospital where Benjamin works, and where they wander its empty halls looking in vain for someone to help them. The book ends in a cataclysm that also involves Benjamin, Rothman and both oumas.

Méira Cook is an extremely talented writer, and this spellbinding book deserves to be nominated for every major literary award. 🍷

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for *The Malahat Review*, *Arc*, *The Antigonish Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *The Danforth Review*, in the US for *Quarterly Conversations*, *Rain Taxi*, *Rattle*, *Big Bridge* and *Galatea Revisits*, and in Australia for *Jacket*.

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