

There Goes English Teacher: A Memoir.

Karin Cronje.

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The story of going to teach English in Korea is near folklore, for South Africans with or without the strong 'r'. Any book on the topic would by now be received with great interest, but Karin Cronje's memoir, *There Goes English Teacher*, does so much more than inscribe urban legend. The confessional narrative takes the reader inside the very workshop of identity, offering glimpses of the self's doing and undoing.

For those who wish to exchange war stories, the book is scattered with nostalgic references: the shoe-box apartment that comes with the previous tenant's stuff (and, often, the previous tenant); the shady *hagwon* boss; the first whiff of kimchi; the jolly expat bar; the glories of *ondol*; release letters and visa runs to Japan; ordering *bibimbap* over the phone by reading a script; somehow, unexpectedly, finding yourself at home.

But it would be a mistake to pick up this book hoping to get an account of South Korea. It is not a travelogue or a guide. And the autobiographical narrator (also called Karin), is unreliable by design. Instead, what the author has painstakingly detailed here, is the experience of losing and finding oneself in a radically

foreign environment. The book is broken up into three parts, "Gweng-song" (the rural town where Karin has her first *hagwon* job), "Seon-chang" (the city where she finds work at a university) and "Home?" (the permanent return to South Africa). These geographical divisions roughly correspond with the familiar sequence of culture shock, adapting and reverse culture shock. What the narrator manages to do is to stay present and conscious and reflexive throughout, divulging experiences that are very hard to relate while the experiencer, the self, is going through processes of disintegration and reintegration. (This results in a stream-of-consciousness writing at times.)

In Gweng-song she initially finds herself in a state of "pre-language." Gone are the reference points of identity: house, dog, son, Table Mountain, friends, beggars on the street. She comes to suspect that what is left inside when all that is familiar has been stripped away is really "a kind of nothingness." Although, vestiges of the old self still assert themselves, as she feels disgust and moral disapproval at the otherness of this culture: the dirty windows, communal eating, the upright mop in the bus; the coyness, the hierarchy, materialism ... She is aware of her cultural arrogance, projecting onto a culture she has no position from which to comprehend. But without any grasp, how is she to live as herself?

The signs of a transformation are subtly woven through the first two parts of the book. The title refers to one aspect of the conversion, as Karin starts to see herself from the other side: oversized, inept, sweaty, wearing "practical Clarks," she shuffles along doing all the most basic things completely wrong. She has to laugh at the "farce," the "spectacle," of people in their apartments looking out and seeing this "foreign figure." She begins to objectify her own foreignness: "Who *are* these English teachers? We are an endless sea of indistinguishable whiteness: the tide comes in, the tide goes out. One Western face after another. [...] With us come our problems. A tide of them. No sooner have you got your teacher through her food poisoning than she is looking for a mattress for her son." (emphasis in original).

As she becomes more accustomed to her new life, the positives become more apparent. There is freedom in being without one's past, one's world. She realises that her old reference points "had become meat hooks in carcasses." A lightness emerges: "Here I am just Karin." A new identity takes shape as she discovers kinship with the significant Korean people in her life. No longer just representations of a larger entity to be understood, these characters are presented as persons who have their own active relation to the cultural environ-

ment, ranging from submissive to defiant, themselves subjects of their own interpretations. Two characters stand out. There is Hye-Mi, the twenty-year-old private student, who is learning to negotiate her femininity: "Men not threatened by me, because I am still friendly to them. If I'm very interested in him, he still thinks I am concerned and care for him. Just a different way. Submissive."

And there is Karin's yogi, the formidable Dae-ho, who "embodies the best of Buddhism" and introduces Karin to many cultural treasures (inextricable from traditions that are also oppressive). He teaches her about breathing and accepting, the key to her transformation. "You showed me a life free from words, where feeling need not be spoken or written, because there is being," she tells him in the tea house upon their farewell.

Karin's decision to return to South Africa is driven by the publication of the book that she had been finishing while working in Korea. From the beginning of the memoir, the narrative of a writer's "never-ending saga" with her writing runs parallel to the one of an English teacher in Korea. There is a thematic affinity between writing and identity disintegration; writing is a way to keep the identity alive: "When you write, you take the forgettable and make it into the meaningful. And with that you rescue potential for understanding and order from the quicksand of daily confusion." But writing is also "dangerous." It has a life of its own and threatens to overwhelm the writer.

The final part of the book interweaves the themes of writing and reverse culture shock. The result is slightly disjointed and at worst detracts from the thematic arch established by the first chapters. Yet, a generous reading may still find unity between Karin's grappling with her writing, and the identity struggles present throughout the narrative. Perhaps Karin's initial decision to leave her whole life behind and go to a completely unfamiliar place like Korea runs parallel to her commitment to writing: both are a leap into the subconscious, away from the predictable, the symbolically fixed structures of an ordinary life; both constitute a choice to "shatter the self you are," and hope for a new self to emerge.

Karin Cronje is no literary lightweight (as her Jan Rabie/Rapport prize for *Alles mooi weer* [2008] attests) and *There Goes English Teacher* is a complex work that explores the themes of identity, language and creativity in unexpected ways. While aspects of the writing are challenging, there is more than enough wit and crafty storytelling to still give anyone an enjoyable read.

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