

Kelder.

Gerda Taljaard. Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2012.
224 pp. ISBN: 978-0-624-05431-3.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v50i1.18>

Meet Esmeralda Hamman, the pathetic elderly white trash writer of slushy romances with writer's block and issues with food and alcohol, and Sus Niemand, the just as pathetic teenage *boervrou* who gave birth to her first child at the age of fourteen and who is entangled in incestuous relationships with her father and brother. These are the two *armsalige hoofkarakters* of Gerda Taljaard's second novel *Kelder*. One stole her child from another woman and the other murdered her—every single one of them.

There is an undeniable darkness about them, yet you cannot help but to have a degree of sympathy for these two miserable women, because of their struggles and most importantly for their humanity. Taljaard chose a very tricky topic for her second novel. There is namely still quite a rigid discourse of motherhood in literature and, frankly, this story does not even remotely fit the traditional discursive framework of how "a mother" should be represented.

The theme is daring and difficult to comprehend but the author succeeded in depicting it in a complex and challenging way. Sus and Esmeralda are everything mothers should not be—Sus silently gives birth to her father's children, then kills them and discards them by way of problem solving, Esmeralda's son has been brought up and formed by a long line of other women, since his own mother was not capable of doing so. Yet they are both capable of maternal love in their own way. Motherhood as depicted in *Kelder* is motherhood in its least rose-coloured form, but still it speaks of the need of a woman to have a child and the unconditional love of a child, despite the circumstances.

One of the most touching moments of the novel is when Sus dreams of her children who come back to her at night, bringing her presents, touching her hair, seeking her company. In this appalling fantasy her children climb from wells, rivers and swamps where she had disposed of them as if they were not really dead, because in her mind they grow up as other children do.

The language, low and middle class white Afrikaans, alternates depending on which character is speaking and/or focalizing. Taljaard clearly has a solid feeling for and a deep knowledge of language and this makes her narration credible. That is, however, in sharp contrast with her characters who border on stereotypes and are difficult to grasp, to say nothing of identify with. It is especially the case with the minor characters. There are Benjamin's girlfriends—Elzette, the evil blonde skinny lawyer, and Martine, the goth with porcelain skin who plays jazz saxophone in her soundproof bathroom whilst standing on the toilet seat. One of Esmeralda's boyfriends is a butcher with massive sideburns. Another boyfriend is a professional big game hunter, there is also a dog whisperer among her boyfriends, and a cross-dresser and a Freemason in one person. The novel could function just as well as a handbook of dysfunctional (sexual) relationships. Apart from the already mentioned incestuous triangle of Sus, Esmeralda also seems to constantly end up in abusive relationships. There is also Esmeralda's son Benjamin who loses his virginity to his teacher and later lets the exploitative blonde vamp Elzette use him and lure him away from his mother. Furthermore, Taljaard also presents the reader with a gay fashion designer dressed in leather shorts and mesh stockings, and an overweight Greek neighbour, Maria Christodoulou, who is constantly cooking, overloading the table with greasy Greek dishes. These characters are amusing in their own right, but they are slightly redundant

within the main storyline.

The novel is a narrative polyphony, featuring Esmeralda and her son Benjamin in the first person, who alternatively tell their part of the story, and Sus in the third person. The structure of the novel resembles a symphony. At first, there is a clear pattern, featuring both female narrators with Benjamin closing the chapter, then Esmeralda and Sus struggling for a chance to speak, taking over from each other a number of times in the course of each chapter with a growing cadence towards the end of the novel, so that in the last two chapters Benjamin disappears as a narrator completely to make space for the mother(s) to tell the last painful bits of her story. He, however, becomes central to the narration as a character, since Esmeralda finally reaches the point of telling the story of acquiring Benjamin, i.e. stealing the baby Daniël from another woman. The author follows the frequently used plot of presenting a mystery at the beginning of the narration, after which the main character—here Esmeralda—attempts to find a resolution through a process of remembering and therapeutic writing.

When, at the beginning of the novel, Esmeralda hears about the gruesome find of bodies of murdered newborn babies near a farm in Magoebaskloof something shifts in her, and she realizes that there is a story she has to tell. While struggling with writer's block, unable to produce another copy-paste romance starring a Patricia, a Chantel, a Bianca, or a Desirée, there is the unappealing Sus Niemand with sad eyes and flat shoes on her mind. In the course of the novel, Esmeralda accepts the challenge and does what the phantom of Sus demands of her. "Moenie worrie nie, ek sal jou help," Sus whispers to Esmeralda, and she does. The writer with writer's block works as if possessed and in a short time, with the help of a few bottles of Johnnie Walker, her new book, *Die storie van Sus Niemand*, is finished. The book is rejected by her publisher, but that

does not matter to her, because the story has been told. Only then, Esmeralda feels, can she begin to work on the next story—the story of Benjamin and herself. Throughout the novel the author gives a number of hints that the situation will be even more complicated than it already seems: there is the old typewriter on which Esmeralda types her romantic novels, there is the lullaby Sus sings to her dead children, there is the urge to travel in both female narrators, etc. *Kelder* is a complex novel with many time lines and Taljaard keeps the fragile literary construct together by means of recurring references and a well-arranged solid structure in that she uses short chapters with titles and subtitles, naming the actual narrator each time. Sometimes this structure, however, feels too solid and the hints less subtle than necessary, not leaving enough space for the reader. This is probably the greatest flaw of this challenging and otherwise well-written novel.

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