

Finding Soutbek.

Karen Jennings. London: Holland Park Press. 2012. 183 pp. ISBN: 978-1-907320-20-0.
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The unique features of the prose of Karen Jennings, so evident in her short stories like "Andries Tatane" and "Making Challah", re-emerge in her striking first novel, *Finding Soutbek*. Jennings' novel, like many of her stories, combines her interest in the way ordinary South Africans exist in the shadow of both their personal pasts and of the long history of colonial conquest and anti-colonial struggle. While her fiction insists on combing this long past with the present, her focus is also on present lives and struggles of the working class and the marginalised. She foregrounds both the poetic and exceptional in these ordinary lives, but does so presenting us with the realities of marginalisation, poverty and struggle for survival that overwhelms these momentary gestures of hope. Jennings' unique achievement in her novel is the manner she is able to create the poetic and allegorical in her spare, understated prose descriptions of character and place, making us believe she is writing about a very particular and real place but which is at the same time metonymic of all South African space.

Despite the fictitious name, Soutbek is a distinctly West Coast town. Jennings drew on her visits to the West Coast towns of Doringbaai and Strandfontein to help create Soutbek, at the mouth of the Oliphants River. Like so many spaces of habitation, urban or rural, in South Africa even nineteen years after the end of formal apartheid in 1994, Soutbek is a riven space. The upper town is the place of the poor and destitute, physically apart from the lower town where the wealthier folk live. It is interesting how Jennings underplays but implies the racial composition of these typical divides. The allegorical and poetic character of the prose is then combined with a bleak

but starkly realistic prose which presents us with an analysis of the growing divide in current South Africa between the poor and the moneyed, and the increasing loss of faith in politics and even in history by the majority of citizens.

These seamless and integrated shifts in narrative mode make *Finding Soutbek* a hauntingly strange and unusual South African novel. It tells the story of Pieter Fortuin, his young wife Anna and the two communities who live in the tiny fishing town of Soutbek in contemporary South Africa. Fortuin, the first coloured mayor of the town, who now of course lives in the lower town, has to cope with a devastating fire destroying many of the dwellings in upper town and displacing the residents to temporary accommodation in the lower town. To compound the woes of the mayor, the fire which marks the opening of the narrative is accompanied by winter flooding and cold that cuts the town off from the world. The apocalyptic start to the novel sets the mood of tragedy and trauma that persists to its very end. The struggle of the folk of the upper town to survive and overcome the natural and man-made catastrophes they face is compounded by the duplicitous role played by Fortuin, who, despite his origins as the son of a poor fisherman from the town, and despite his philanthropic acts, becomes wealthy through devious and self-serving schemes and whose plans to reconstruct the upper town would entail further forced removals of the poor.

This tale of dystopia in contemporary small town South Africa is told in tandem with a second, historical narrative that recounts the origins of Soutbek in the journey into the North West interior by an expedition group, led by rogue free burgher Pieter van Meer- man from Van Riebeeck's Cape in the early 1660s. This narrative is supposedly the historical research done by Fortuin and an out-cast professor and apologist for apartheid

living in Soutbek, Pearson. Fortuin and Pearson are intent on gentrifying the town by increasing its appeal to tourists, claiming this history, which they publish as a book, demonstrates the uniqueness of Soutbek in the South African political landscape because it has been a place of racial harmony with the integration of Dutch colonists, and Khoisan, Strandloper and Namakqua natives since its very foundation centuries ago. While this parallel narrative starts off tenuously linked to the contemporary one, the history book and the story of contemporary Soutbek become increasingly entangled as characters are inspired and then disillusioned by the book.

Jennings invites the reader to consider the complicated manner history is refashioned to give legitimacy to particular conceptions of and vested interests in the present. For example, Fortuin and his collaborator fabricate this history for their own selfish ends, but this does not stop Anna, the founding Sara who lives with the Fortuins and Willem, Fortuin's down-and-out nephew, from finding inspiration in the book initially. When the history is eventually exposed as a fake, the ever-present divide between Fortuin on the one hand, and his wife, nephew and the community on the other, becomes an insurmountable chasm as Fortuin is exposed and isolated for the self-serving public official he is.

The ending of the novel is almost completely devoid of hope as the town of Soutbek disintegrates after the failed gentrification attempt by Fortuin and Professor Pearson leads to a stalled public housing project for the upper town inhabitants and the privileged from lower town sell off property and abandon the

town. The despair that pervades at the end, and the cynicism that prevails about history and the idea of progress it carries, make this an unusually pessimistic but certainly not unrealistic ending to a post-apartheid novel. The remaining characters gather around the grave of one of their young, whom despair has driven to suicide, as the iron ore train rattles by, taking the metal from the interior to the coast further south for export, symbolic of how globalised capitalist exchange bypasses Soutbek and impoverishes it.

Finding Soutbek is published by the London-based Holland Park Press which has as its mission to bring Dutch authors of fiction and poetry to a wider English readership. According to the Holland Park Press website, Jennings was born in Cape Town in 1982 and she holds MA degrees in both English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town. She is currently working on her second novel as part of a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her short stories, the form she focussed on till her stab at the novel, have been widely acclaimed, both nationally and in places like Greece and Australia. The story "From Dark" won the Commonwealth Short Story Competition for the African region in 2010. Jennings has published her innovative work in alternative and web-based fora like *Botsotso*, *The Kalahari Review* and *Itch*. Her second novel is keenly awaited.

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