

**Notes from the Lost Property
Department.**

Bridget Pitt. Cape Town: Penguin
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Amputations and scars announce the truth of a wounded body that has suffered an unquestionable trauma. In contrast, an injury to the brain leaves its subterranean mark in more subtle ways. This kind of trauma is not declared by the body but is rather concealed—contained—within it, its long-term effects discernible only through such markers as a loss of motor-skills and memory, and changes in behaviour. Bridget Pitt's *Notes from the Lost Property Department* (2015) is primarily concerned with the ways in which these invisible wounds cause disjunctions in personal identity and fissures in relationships. Exploring the effects of dementia and brain injury on a mother and daughter, her novel seeks to address the difficulties involved in the reparation of these psychic contusions.

The narrative itself straddles three decades. In 1972, eleven-year old Iris Langley falls off a cliff in the Drakensberg mountain range after witnessing her mother's involvement in an event that permanently fractures her own perception of the world. Over the next few years, her mother, Grace, painstakingly works at rebuilding Iris's motor-skills and piecing together her cracked sense of self, all the time keeping from her the truth of what happened on the mountain. This rehabilitative project is not entirely successful and

as an adult Iris still has difficulty adapting to the demands of society. In 2012, Grace suffers a stroke and is found in the rose garden of the frail care facility at which she stays. Confused and incoherent, she echoes a plaintive refrain in Zulu (a language she last spoke as a child) —'I am lost,' she wails disconsolately (40). The roles are reversed and Iris now has to take charge and attempt to stitch together the fragments of what her mother has spent the last thirty years concealing from her. The interconnecting narratives slowly draw together towards the accident on the mountain and Iris embarks on a journey to the Drakensberg to revisit the site of her trauma.

The novel has been met with euphoric reviews: Jennifer Crocker rhapsodizes that "Pitt brings to life the lives of Grace and Iris [...] with a fluid charm that makes [it] one of the most beautiful and moving books [she has] read in many years" (28). Similarly, Jeremy Cronin writes on the book's cover that "Pitt's new novel has found a voice for wounded memory [...], evoking from jumbled discards something that perhaps we've all lost ... but which might still be found". While Cronin's assessment does speak to the ways in which the novel's concerns resonate with a wide audience, Pitt's attempt at giving voice to "wounded memory" is an extensive undertaking that is not sustained with the same degree of subtlety throughout the novel. For instance, the care with which Pitt portrays Grace in the months before her stroke afterwards gives way to a flatness often intended to invoke humour rather than pathos.

The sections of the novel that deal with the time Grace spends living in the “Lavender Lodge Frail Care Facility” are among its more compelling. The neo-liberal institutionalisation that informs caring for the elderly is underpinned by an unsurprising paradox: the elderly, the receivers of “care”, are removed from the spheres of economy that enable and necessitate their confinement to these facilities. This, coupled with the inevitable enervation and physical decline that accompany older age, results in a perception of the elderly as homogenously burdensome lesser-citizens, grey-haired children requiring the autocratic guidance of a social system that claims to speak in their best interest. Pitt’s portrayal of the nursing staff at Lavender Lodge does at times tend towards caricature (as can be seen, for instance, in Sister Samson’s “misty gaze” (146) of pride when she surveys “her citadel, her triumph”, the nappy room (147)). However, the depiction of the months prior to Grace’s stroke poignantly captures the difficulties an elderly person faces in maintaining a discrete sense of identity within a context that seeks to obliterate individuality. Grace’s unexpected friendship with Gideon, a security guard with a university degree forced to flee Zimbabwe in search of better opportunities in South Africa, becomes an escape from “Sister Samson’s regime of deathly hygiene” (43). The two share a love of poetry and roses (the rose being a motif that is already announced pictographically on the novel’s cover and which is sustained somewhat doggedly throughout the narrative). The

conversations with Gideon in the rose garden allow Grace to set herself apart from Lavender Lodge’s other inhabitants. Unfortunately, Pitt portrays these inhabitants with far less care than she does Grace, her broad strokes rendering them comic stock figures of the confused elderly—Mrs Appleton hides a stash of leftover bacon in her underwear drawer and Mr Robinson sings “Land of Hope and Glory” when Sister Samson wipes his bottom. While the novel could at times be accused of being selective in the nuance it affords representations of its more marginal characters, the importance of its rendering of the invisible world of frail care facilities cannot be ignored.

Through Grace’s conversations with Gideon the reader pieces together the events that precipitate Iris’s fall from the mountain in 1972. Concurrently, the reader follows Iris to the Drakensberg as she relives and begins to remember that which Grace has kept from her. The long-withheld exposure of the nature of Grace’s secret (a revelation which does not come as a surprise to any astute reader) is ostensibly the point towards which the narrative drives. The novel’s power, however, derives from Pitt’s illustration of the complexities surrounding Iris and Grace’s relationship and from her evocation of the mutability of memory. Despite the ways in which certain aspects of *Notes from the Lost Property Department* are disappointing and underdeveloped, the sections of the novel that detail the oppressive negation of Grace’s life in an institutional frail care facility are significant as they astutely bring to light

the trauma of what it means to be a frail recipient of “care”.

Work Cited

Crocker, Jennifer. “Beautiful, wonderfully complex”.
Cape Times 25 Sept. 2015. 28.

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