

## Book Review

***The Writing Circle***. Rozena Maart. Toronto: Tsar Publications, 2007; 199 pages; ISBN 978-1-894770-37-8; \$20.95 (paper).

This novel is a denunciatory comment on violence, and violence against women in particular, delivered through the personal narratives of five women friends. Isabel, Jazz, Carmen, Beauty and Amina are an ethnically diverse group of middle-upper class professional women (a social worker, neurosurgeon, psychotherapist, sculptor and fashion designer) who meet as a women's writing circle every Friday evening in Isabel's Cape Town suburban home. As four of the friends are gathered in Isabel's living room awaiting her arrival one evening, Isabel is attacked and raped in her car by a hijacker as she attempts to enter the gates of her yard.

The book is presented as a two-part series of consecutive personal narratives describing the aftermath of Isabel's rape and providing readers with details about the characters and the socio-political networks connecting the friends. Readers are introduced to a South Africa replete with all the complexities of postcolonial transition. Rape is a core thematic in this text. All five women are survivors of rape and/or other forms from violent masculinity. Maart centres violence as a key element common to all five women in their subjective experiences of womanhood, cutting across boundaries of difference.

The life stories presented here attest to the diversity of ways by which individuals gain membership into the middle and upper classes in contemporary South Africa. Beauty, a Xhosa woman and successful sculptor from a working class black township (Khayelitsha) background, is the first generation in her family to enter the ranks of the middle class. For the others, middle class status is a legacy of colonial years when family assets accrued from direct links to the English Empire or from the spaces made available to "middle races" in the South African colonial project.

There is a problematic engagement with cultural difference in this novel. Beauty, the only black woman, is written as sentimentally drawn to the black rapist's corpse (he was shot by Isabel during the rape) as a means of retaining a critical understanding of the ongoing effects of colonialism and racism. "Was he a frustrated man who had suffered in his Blackness because his oppression had put him there and nowhere else?" Beauty asks herself (53). This characterization of Beauty, particularly in contrast to the other women's explicit denunciations of the rapist's heinous brutality against Isabel, re-inscribes the stereotype of black women's complicity in patriarchy for the purpose of engaging in cultural identity politics. Indeed, later in Part II, we curiously find out that the black man whose socio-political condition so concerned Beauty was the pampered upper class son of her wealthy godmother. He had been doted on by his well off black parents his entire life. Why must Beauty's concern with ongoing racism and social inequality necessarily take this

apologetic form with regard to rape?

The contributions of this novel lie in its reflection of the increasingly diverse social networks of South Africans and in its focus on violence against women as a key challenge to the success of democratic principles and governance. Through her five women characters, Maart highlights personal agency among survivors of violence. The particular setting of this novel among a diverse group of middle and upper class Capetonians, can serve as an opening for us to branch out and ponder the contours of violence against women and agency in South Africa more widely. What do vulnerability and courage look like in the absence of income and housing?

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