

ily with scorn, the poorest patients wait for hours, sometimes in vain, in order to be seen by the doctor or his assistant. It is also a satire of a political elite uninterested in the fate of ordinary people. The final sections of the book portray a utopia. We are in the year 2023. Now known to the world as The Republic of Sands (and to its inhabitants as Sahelia), the country prospers due to a renegotiation of the rights to the exploitation of its mineral resources. Its GDP rises, beggars and cripples disappear from the streets, absorbed into the social fabric that provides them with befitting work. New schools and universities open, ones named for illustrious figures, for the men and women who had helped to build the country. But Tidjani Alou refuses to indulge in facile optimism. The lifespan of this ideal society is only a decade.

The final chapter is entitled "Renaissance." But Nina remains skeptical about the "African Renaissance": "I do not believe in Renaissance by decree," she says. The book concludes with Nina's declaration of love for her new country. She chooses to be and declares herself a Sahelian. In discovering the blue mountains, the desert, and the meadows of dead grass in the country's north, she also discovers her own love for the Republic of Sands. Her litany of the landscape's features resonates as an echo of Thabo Mbeki's speech, "I am an African," which begins with reference to the "valleys," "mountains," "deserts," "trees," and "flowers" of the African continent.

On m'appelle Nina also consists of a struggle to reclaim one's individuality and affirm an identity. Nina affirms a personal

and individual "I" against an invasive "we": "I resist," she writes, "I give myself a new name. I call myself Iva." "Iva, insisting upon the letter I." This is a meaningful claim since from the beginning of her Nigerian life, Vilhelmina was abbreviated to "Nina," because, so she explains to us, the "v" does not exist in Hausa, the language of her in-laws.

This book, a confidence or perhaps a confession, is a composite narrative made of opposites, like the image on the book cover: luxuriant vegetation and verdant mountains in the foreground, sand dunes in the middle distance, then a sea of sand, and along the line of the horizon, violet-blue mountains.

Antoinette Tidjani-Alou's text is a lyrical one, now cutting, now exhilarating, and run through with literary illusions, from Paul Verlaine to Aimé Césaire, from the Books of Ruth to the Song of Songs.

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The Printmaker.

Bronwyn Law-Viljoen.

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Bronwyn Law-Viljoen was interviewed about her novel on RSG (radiosondergense) this year by Corina van der Spoel during *Skrywers en Boeke*, and I was intrigued by the discussion. It appears that she had been asked to curate the work

of an unknown South African artist and print-maker (Marcus Glazer) and she had archived his work and organized an exhibition. Her novel is loosely based on this experience. It centres on the life and work of a reclusive man who lives in contemporary Johannesburg and who reads, writes poetry and makes thousands of prints and etchings.

In the interview Law-Viljoen says that she was fascinated by the fact that this man continued making images, even though he had no public recognition or monetary reward from it: "What fascinated me about this character was his ability to continue to generate images without having an audience for them, or having a very circumscribed audience and it was that aspect of his life that interested me" (Law-Viljoen). When asked why she wrote the book, she said: "Writing the novel was a way to try to understand something about the making of art."

When I started the first chapter of this book I was intrigued and also a little wary. I was intrigued because it is about art and creativity. Written in the first person, it takes you into the mind of March, the Printmaker himself and his problems with his art: "I am afraid there is nothing left to draw" (9). This is the opening sentence of the novel, and it is an arresting thought. What does it mean for an artist if that is how he feels? From a common-sense point of view, there is always something to draw, but that is only if your only goal is to represent what you see around you. It is a simplistic goal. Art has gone in so many different directions from that starting point. So you

realize that this book is going to take you into the complexities of art and different ways of representation—and, of course, the source of creativity.

However, I felt wary because the statement is also a profoundly negative one. It seemed to signal an exploration into a depressed mind, a melancholic mind and it made me think, fleetingly, of J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* where you are taken into the mind of a grim lonely female on an isolated farm through a long monologue. Not much is revealed about the life circumstances of the Printmaker at this point. We are only given his inner life and thoughts which revolve around his creativity. I thought that a whole book inside this mind and these emotions promises to be a heavy read. But I was mistaken.

Where this book differs entirely from the Coetzee novel is in its multi-vocal narration. Each chapter is written in the first person, but that person is different. It alternates between the Printmaker himself, March, and the other people in his life: his mother, Ann; his friend, Thea; his gardener, Stephen, and the curator of his prints, Helena. In this way you are given different perspectives on his life, each from a personal, but also limited point of view.

The other important factor in the unfolding of this narrator is the flexible representation of time. Each chapter is headed by the name of the narrator and the date, month and year. It is not in chronological sequence, obviously, so you have to piece together the sequence of events, yourself. Slowly events seem to

emerge and gather in sequence around this figure, as if the events of his life are being revealed like a jig-saw puzzle.

The skill of Bronwyn Law-Viljoen as a writer is partly in her construction of the narrative: in her choices about the juxta-positioning of the voices. For example, the isolated voice of March in the first chapter is followed by Helena in the second chapter. She doesn't know him, and comes to his house after he has died, to see the prints he has made. Because she has never met him, her perspective is the closest to the readers', and together we embark on a journey of discovery about this man. It is as if you are first given a very slight line-drawing of this man and slowly the details are filled in and relationships added until there is a network surrounding that initial single, isolated figure.

The other important choice that the writer makes in determining the shape of this narrative is deciding which period of time should be exposed at different points in the narrative. It begins near the end of his life, proceeds to after his death and then takes you back in the past, dipping into his experience at different points in his life. What this does is to gradually build up your understanding of the relationships that surround him earlier in his life and towards the end.

I think that one of the strengths of this narrative is the sensitivity with which the portrait of March is drawn. It is as if the writer keeps a respectful distance from him and does not presume to know all his thoughts. Certainly, in the chapters where March is the speaker, his thoughts

are revealed but these are very much involved with the present moment and with his art. This gives the novel authenticity as it gives minute technical details about the process of print-making. But as far as his relationships are concerned, there is a certain reticence, which also serves to build dramatic tension as one waits for the final revelation at the end, when Helena travels to Zimbabwe to deliver the box to Stephen.

If I may for a moment compare it again with the Coetzee novel, it has much more delicacy with regard to the main character. Coetzee seems to relish giving all the macabre details of the woman's fantasies. He writes everything, without restraint, in an unrelenting monologue, but Law-Viljoen leaves spaces, leaves uncertainty, leaves possibilities, within the first person narration. She allows the reader to make their own picture of the man she is writing about and also subtly writes herself, as the curator, out of the picture in the end, leaving the integrity of the Printmaker and his important relationships, and his art, intact.

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