

A Hibiscus Coast.

Nick Mulgrew.

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In 2022 there are few subjects that loom as large in the collective imagination of white South Africa as emigration. This points to many different things, among them white settler entitlement, privilege, and deep-seated

racial anxieties. The belief that white people were somehow shorted by democracy, that we fell victim to something intolerable, and that we deserve a better life elsewhere, is easy to make fun of. This is what Nick Mulgrew does delightfully in *A Hibiscus Coast* (2021), while also exploring complicated underlying issues like human belonging, fear, grief, and the afterlives of colonialism.

The book starts when the Da Costa family learn that their neighbours were murdered. It is Christmas in 1997 in a security complex in Durban North. A few days later, after some drinks in a bar on New Year's Eve, Mary Da Costa's boyfriend hits her in the face. The combined shock of these two violent events prompts Mary's parents to buy her a one-way ticket to New Zealand where she is to stay with family friends until her parents are able to join her there permanently.

At one level, the book is a portrait of white South Africans living in New Zealand, and Mulgrew spares us none of the garish and unflattering details. There is the heavy drinking; the casual homophobia; the shop that sells Rascals, All Gold and Pronutro; the men that easily shift "into army mode" (136); the Mad Dogs tracksuits, the conspiracy theories, the perceived victimhood, potato salad seasoned with Aromat and the parties complete with Johnny Clegg, blackface, and "dunes of cheese Nik-Naks that glowed like fool's gold" (259). The expats talk endlessly about crime, their conversations repeatedly loop back to debates about whether Nelson Mandela is a hero or a terrorist, "all their video tapes [are] just old rugby games" (162).

They are looking for a place where they can be unashamedly themselves, away from the judgmental gaze of politically correct post-apartheid South Africa and the alienating presence of their new compatriots. Looking in on them is very funny, but also embarrassing and, most of all, unsettling. What emerges is a deep displacement—both spatial and temporal. At stake is the preservation of a past that is long gone, in a country that is far away. The expats find themselves living in a place that is no place, not unlike their settler forefathers with their anxious attempts to cultivate an anachronistic England at the sun-drenched tip of Africa.

Mulgrew explicitly expands on this parallel by bringing the South African expats in conflict with the local indigenous population. The South Africans want to establish a South African Centre which would offer "a bar to watch rugby" and "a place to have New South African parties where half-a dozen shoe polished-faced Nelson Mandelas wouldn't raise an eyebrow" (137). For this centre, they have their sights on a property that currently houses the Māori cultural centre. "Those

South Africans [...] Here they come with their ill-gotten gains to take the land everyone else hasn't already taken" (38), Māori leader Nepukaneha Cooper laments.

A book such as this runs the risk of being simply judgmental and moralising, and this could have been the case with *A Hibiscus Coast* if it was not for the complicated, interesting, and wonderfully vivid main character whose struggle to find her feet in adulthood adds profound depth and complexity to the story. Mary, a grungy nineties kid, "swathed in black" and "shod in work boots" (136), seems displaced even while she is still in Durban and living in her parents' house. At the time she works at the local video store where she passes the hours rewinding video tapes and eating microwave popcorn. A few chapters in, the reader starts to understand that Mary is grieving, permanently unmoored by her brother's death. When she arrives in New Zealand, she is put up in a room with walls covered in old pictures of Decembers in Durban. She waits for her parents to arrive, or at least to call, but neither of those things seem to happen. In the narration of Mary's story, the perspective switches between first and third person, intensifying one's sense of a character disconnected from her own centre.

The book starts with, and the rest of the story is permeated by, white South Africans' fear of violent crime: "They'd spoken already about crime, and they would surely return to the topic" (169). Paradoxically, this fear offers comfort to the expats—"[c]rime could be relied upon" (169)—it implies for them a danger that is contained by the Black racial Other, something that New Zealand offers refuge from. But, as the narrative progresses, the unease mounts, an inversion happens and the threat of the racial Other is replaced by something far less clear:

No one saw them. Maybe that word should be capitalised: *Them*. That's how everyone speaks about criminals over there. What did They do? What did They take? Did they catch Them? But no one saw Them. Yet we all knew what They looked like. We all thought we saw Them, all the time. Like a shadow, trailing us (19).

Insistently highlighting the overt (but determinedly overlooked) violence of patriarchy, whiteness, coloniality, and capitalism, Mulgrew repeatedly reveals the dangerous stranger to be within, rather than without.

A Hibiscus Coast does not simplify anything, does not try to redeem nor condemn—it complicates. It shows how much we lose when we close ourselves off to that which is strange, Other and new—whether it is at home or somewhere else. Although it resists a

linear path of character growth and healing for Mary (or any of the other characters) it does offer hope; hope in connection and relation, and in the expansive power of opening oneself up to that which is unknown and outside.

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