

Under Glass.

Claire Robertson. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2018. 300pp. ISBN 978-1-4152-0970-7.

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Claire Robertson has produced three substantial novels: *The Spiral House* (winner of the Sunday Times Fiction Prize), *The Magistrate of Gower*, and now *Under Glass*. She is mining a rich and distinctive vein of historical evocation; although each novel is set in a different time and milieu, they feel of a piece. There are certain similarities of voice between the three, some overlaps in their circling around issues of women's domesticity, repressed sexualities, conditions of entrapment of "sorry green colonialists" (*Glass* 84) on the margins of greater societal forces. Though they are period pieces of exquisite precision, world events revolve in a shadowy dance behind the primary scenes of a slave house, a kitchen, an isolated magistracy, a sugar plantation.

The Spiral House is set in two periods, narrated in interlocking chapters. The first is the 1790s in the Cape Colony, focused on the experiences of a Dutch-Malay woman, Katreijn van de Caab, caught in a strange twilight zone, technically free but obliged still to live much as a slave, yet better-

educated than many of her "masters". The second strand is set a century and a half later, mostly on a mission station in the Limpopo borderlands and refracted through one Sister Vergilius. Despite some commonalities of theme, this feels a touch contrived: two novels, almost, struggling to escape a single cover. *The Magistrate of Gower*, with its Hardy-like title, is more satisfactorily singular in its chronological line (roughly 1900–39), even as the omniscient narration ranges across characters. Gower is a small Karoo-type dorp, its inhabitants barely aware of bigger cities or the surrounding countryside. Robertson has moved to occupy a space in between the dyspeptic modern urban novel and the conventional plaasroman with its expansive bucolic spaces. Her settings admirably suit characters who are caught in liminal situations, like Magistrate Vos in his tortured sexuality, whose stories are seldom told.

Under Glass explores another such neglected space, yet one just as common and crucial to white settlement: the sugar cane estate in peri-coastal Zululand in the mid-1800s. This is also a two-strand novel, but cannily integrated. The main strand is omniscient but centred on the character of Mrs Chetwyn, wife to an emergent

sugar-cane farmer and mother of five. The second, alternating voice belongs to the youngest of the five, "Cosmo", whose true position in the family emerges only in the last quarter or so. Only a second reading reveals just how cunningly the clues are laid—and omitted. In the opening pages, we learn that certain household members are "loyal to [a] conspiracy"—but I will not reveal its precise nature here.

At least three aspects of Robertson's writing deserve highlighting. One is how a density of research is deftly integrated into the portrayal of everyday textures and the revelation of character—what she might well call a "housewifely" use of "lore, vigilance and care with thoroughness, thrift and duty" (72). Each novel is intimately informative without ever feeling didactic. Much is filtered through the primary purview of the domestic, even ruminations on wider dynamics of empire, agriculture or science; never does the technically omniscient narrator obtrude. Rather, what is not said is equally important: almost every sentence is resonant with implication. The richness lies somewhere between the intellectuality of George Eliot and the metaphoric lyricism of Australia's Patrick White.

This relates closely to a second aspect: Robertson's remarkable control of voice. In all three novels, she has developed a mode of present-tense narration which is influenced by the cadences and vocabularies of the depicted period, but which still feels unique—both authentic and invented, as it were—a sort of "neo-archaism". In the case of Katreijn in *The*

Spiral House a non-English speaker's sensibility is conveyed in a unique, exotic yet natural English argot: a triumph. In the case of Cosmo, the sensibility of a child, despite being considered from a point of adult sophistication, is almost magically conveyed in the present tense. If there is a tiny criticism to be injected here, it is that the passages of interiority briefly accorded to the Zulu manservant/guide Fuze, or to the indentured Indian maid Griffin, are not strongly enough differentiated from Mrs Chetwyn or, for that matter, Magistrate Vos. A danger, perhaps, of falling victim to one's own success. (Though our fashionable shibboleths of race and gender are present throughout, they are filtered through complex relationships, a strategy refreshingly free of cant, gross binarism and sentimentality.)

Thirdly, Robertson's narrative focus is not only on domestic space and activity, which is evoked with an extraordinary density of accoutrements and processes, but on bodily responses even to intellectual thought. Character is conveyed through gesture and sensation rather than through authorial "telling". Building personalities and milieux pixel by pixel, as it were, Robertson places a lot of faith in her reader to sense the implications. Consequently, there is scarcely a dull sentence in the entire novel, scarcely a paragraph not worth re-reading for its balance, resonance, and lyricism. A representative passage:

"The land is uneasy. Almost uncanny," he [Chetwyn] says. He makes a picture of suspicious homesteads and women alone and marks of newness and

strange patterns in the way cattle are herded and rivers forded. He speaks of a sense of tremors, the quivers that will sweep across the flanks of a horse hours after it has been in a carriage wreck—tremors under the surface, startlement never far, nerves rinsed and taut. But oh, the look of it. “It has a way with hills,” he says, and strokes the air as if stroking an animal’s flank, and speaks of hills that follow one another in successive swells to the north, or cut off to the east, all sharing the same blunt, sudden end ... (55).

Beautifully done: the sentences are carried by a rhythmic quality; the metaphors evoke the characters’ own lifeways; a forceful poetry sparks through, as in the assonance of “blunt, sudden”. A concise indirectness of speech is preferred over empty dialogue. These are hallmarks of a novelist who is, I believe, writing as well as anyone in the country today.

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