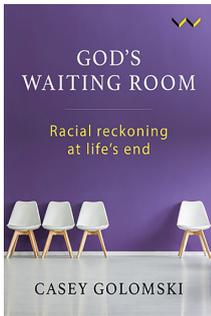




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God's Waiting Room: Racial Reckoning at Life's End



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Casey Golomski

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# Old age, apartheid and a history that keeps on repeating itself

The excitement of receiving a parcel from the courier, after I had long forgotten about the request to review Casey Golomski's book, is palpable. It is the Wits University Press edition, featuring a cover adorned with a picture of a purple wall, modern white chairs, and a shiny floor – three chairs grouped against the purple wall and a fourth positioned slightly off the edge of the page. Modern, clinical, abstract and somehow not related at all to the messy contents behind the cover. I had heard of the book and had perused it online, as I am interested in old-age homes in South Africa. (Not only did I spend much of my childhood in one where my mother was the matron for 18 years, but I have also worked in the aged care sector for the past 28 years. I always joke that growing up in an old-age home gave me my knock in life.)

'Never judge a book by its cover' is my first thought as I tear open the parcel. (Why do courier and delivery companies always package items as if they are nuclear waste?) I decide to take a weekend trip with my dogs to indulge in this process, a first for me, with trepidation.

To write this book, Golomski dedicated seven years to immersing himself in the lives of older individuals and their caregivers at a retirement home in South Africa, for the purpose of anonymity named 'Grace'. Grace is one of approximately a thousand typical retirement homes found across South Africa, where predominantly white seniors are assisted by mainly black caregivers. One of the many remnants of the apartheid legacy, these homes were largely built during apartheid as part of a "major social welfare policy" (p. 10), with many established by church or women's welfare organisations to support impoverished white seniors.

Golomski's richly layered and textured descriptions testify to the considerable time he spent in this home and underscore his keen anthropological observation skills. The smells, sounds, images, and intricate layers of human interactions depicted in the book feel remarkably authentic and, at times, profoundly moving. The writing, characterised by its rhizomatic nature, intertwines both horizontal and vertical performative storylines as Golomski condenses the narrative (and seven years of research) into one day in the lives of the residents and caregivers at Grace. He becomes part of the narrative, an insider engaging in caregiving tasks such as bathing, feeding and dressing. Although the story unfolds over a single day, it is interwoven with constructions of selfhood, history, and contextual situations that transcend the immediate. The reader walks the passages with Golomski, meeting residents, hearing their stories and at the same time becoming part of the daily routine of the institution while all its realities of life and death are playing out.

A gravesite on the premises of Grace, which is the subject of significant political debate with a local group asserting it as ancestral land, serves as a metaphor for a profound exploration of African culture. Golomski skillfully articulates shared contexts and realities while simultaneously recognising significant differences. His encounters with two men – one a resident and the other a caregiver – both of whom are gay, challenge assumptions about race and gender, political context and representational violence. A conversation with one of the caregivers in the closet evokes delicate nuances of the world of LGBTIQ+ realities.

The narratives of the people of Grace express polar opposite realities of being in the world, highlighting conflicting histories and the complex sociopolitical experiences of apartheid that unfold in daily interactions between care recipients and care providers, creating liminal spaces of possibility. Through the relationality of storytelling within this parallel universe, one hopes that new understandings of differences, possible identities, histories and more hopeful futures might emerge. I don't know if Golomski is convinced of this possibility. "And yet we're still left asking: what do we *get* out of all this?" (p. 188). (At this point I am acutely aware of my reading of the text – being a white, gay, South African man working in institutions exactly like Grace, trying for the past 30 years to create a different narrative and creating authentic relationships between residents and caregivers.)

'Grace' and 'reckoning' are two concepts that the writer grapples with throughout the text, engaging the reader in philosophical, religious, ethical, moral and political discussions. Noeline, one of the professional nurses at the home, cared for Nelson Mandela on Robben Island and later at Pollsmoor Prison. The unexpected coincidence of her presence and her stories add depth and significance to the notions of grace and reckoning. Issues of forgiveness and repentance challenge the reader, delving into what it means to be a Christian and, ultimately, what it signifies to grow old and frail. The constant presence of residents living with dementia serves as a reminder that there are those whose stories we do not know and may never know. Furthermore, just as the systems of power in the world remain vastly unequal, true reckoning will also remain skewed. Grace's caregivers will continue to embody grace, offering it to those who (considering their past) often do not deserve it. They will remain the ones enduring arduous 12-hour shifts, confronting inadequate public transport, and facing racist slurs and reactions.

Through storying, Golomski creates layers of meaning-making that grapples with racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, the politics of whiteness, witchcraft, ancestors, ghosts, death and dying, history, and the sociopolitical landscape of South Africa, from the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape to envisioning a possible future where equality may become a reality. From the presence of graves in the front garden to employees partaking in a webinar on diversity, the charismatic (Golomski refers to him as 'sexy') priest delivering his sermon, to a bullet in a silver casing fired at a resident in then-Rhodesia, weave together a vibrant tapestry of stories that generate enough curiosity to inspire readers to explore all the references in the endnotes. The multivocality and interwovenness of people and their stories create a lingering sense of ambiguity right to the end.

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The stories woven through the interactions of the inhabitants of Grace provide the reader with a glimpse into a world that largely remains unseen by the public. We hear of the horrors in old-age homes in the news when cases of abuse arise, a narrative all too often eagerly recounted by populist journalism. A week after finishing the book, I still pondered the quality of the relationships between residents and caregivers. Golomski

guides the reader into a realm of uncertainty. Is there any prospect of genuine forgiveness? Do white residents and black caregivers merely tolerate one another (with) (at) Grace?

The book leaves me in a dark and perplexed mood. Uncertain. Unresolved.

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