

# Somewhere inside the rainbow

A woman of white settler ancestry ventures to the Kalahari Desert to find her place in South Africa's "Rainbow Nation," a term coined after that country's first election allowing blacks to vote.

The *Afrikaner* arises from Arianna Dagnino's five-year stint as a journalist in South Africa during the late 1990s.

**The Afrikaner**  
by Arianna Dagnino  
(Guernica Editions \$20)

**T**he *Afrikaner* begins with a carjacking in Johannesburg during which a white man describes himself being shot and killed by blacks, all recorded in the present tense. It's actually 1997, only four years after Archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize laureate **Desmond Tutu** used the term Rainbow Nation to describe his countrymen in the wake of South Africa's first fully democratic election.

The post-apartheid narrator for the first three pages, Dario Oldani, a brilliant, young paleontologist determined to work away from the research hotspots in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania), was hoping to discover the cradle of humankind might actually be in South Africa or Namibia instead.

The *Afrikaner* of **Arianna Dagnino's** novel turns out to be Dario's grief-stricken lover and colleague, Zoe Du Plessis, who, despite being from a deeply entrenched white family [the word Boer is avoided], is little concerned with money, status or personal appearance. Instead she seeks belonging.

"Her life is no different from that of many other white-born children of this continent: She invaded Africa, grew in her womb, was raised by her and learned to love her as if she were her real mother, no matter how dysfunctional the womb might turn out to be."

Zoe gains permission to continue Dario's dig in the Kalahari, across the border in

Namibia, grateful to leave her liberal and ambitious brother to manage the family's venerable wine business.

A fellow paleontologist once suggested it would be easier for Zoe Du Plessis to give herself to an Australopithecus than to a man in the flesh. "Only Dario succeeded in breaking her subliminal veto." But our protagonist is no prude. Rather, Zoe has gleaned that romantic love is dangerous for first-born daughters of the Du Plessis clan due to a curse thrown at a male family member by an old Xhosa diviner during a massacre that happened in the year 1801. "White Man! From now on, the first-born females in your family will see their men die before producing offspring."

Zoe learns all this from diaries and letters written by a succession of first-born aunts dating back to the late 19th century. She is also spooked by having witnessed, at age thirteen, the rape of her family's beloved mixed-blood maidservant, Georgina, in the kitchen, by Georgina's boss. At the time, Georgina pleaded with Zoe not to tell. The victim and perpetrator remain in the employ of Zoe's brother, who is none the wiser.

That's the set-up. Woe is Zoe.

*The Afrikaner* becomes a convincing and deeply moving account of how a brave woman is determined to take "her first steps out of the cage of her Afrikaner heritage" to feel she is a necessary and good part of the new Rainbow Nation.

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EARLY ON IN THE NOVEL, ZOE recalls a brilliant black man she knew in London during the 1980s. Thabo Nyathi had

moved to England from South Africa thanks to a scholarship. Later Zoe and Thabo both applied at a new research unit at Witwaterstand University in South Africa. What happened next is worth quoting in its entirety.

"The choice fell on her — a Du Plessis — and Piet de Vries, another thoroughbred Afrikaner. Thabo, the best among the candidates, didn't make it. He accepted the verdict with composed dignity. She accepted the posting without venturing to say a word in his favour. They both knew Thabo

would be precluded from any further career in the field of paleoanthropology, at least in South Africa.

"At that time, not even academia, supposedly the patron of broad-mindedness, was ready to open its doors to blacks. But even out there in the bigger world, Zoe asked herself then, conscious of this injustice: How many black paleoanthropologists were there? Did they exist? Did they have a voice? Did they publish books? Although the largest number of hominid fossils had been found in Af-

rica, she was not aware of any paleoanthropological research team headed by a black. As in the golden age of safaris, the white bwana commanded and the black porter looked after the luggage.

"She hasn't heard from Thabo since then. But she has never forgiven herself for having kept quiet. The moral wrong has seeped into her, day after day, digging into her. To no one has she confessed her cowardice. For years she has felt this infamy burn inside her. She's no better than other whites who, being in the know, kept their mouths shut; who, at seeing a black kicked or whipped with the sjambok, have turned their head away. This sick feeling about herself has grown within her like a consuming cancer—it clogs the pores, deadens the heart."

In the field, near an encampment of twenty San Bushmen people, in charge of men under strenuous circumstances, able to have a brief shower only once a week, Zoe proceeds to explore her place in South African society, contemporary and otherwise, with a candour that makes *The Afrikaner* increasingly engaging.

North Americans have gleaned a deeper awareness of South Africa through **Alan Paton's** *Cry the Beloved Country*, as well as works from authors **Laurens Jan van der Post**, **Nadine Gordimer** and **J.M. Coetzee**. We've also seen *Invictus* or *A Dry White Season* or **Richard Attenborough's** *Cry Freedom* about **Stephen Biko**, the man that **Nelson Mandela** described as "the spark that lit a veld fire across South Africa."

*The Afrikaner* deserves its place in that pantheon.

**"I wanted to explore what it means — both at an individual and collective level — to find yourself on the wrong side of history and what kind of coping behaviours you would be led to adopt once the whole world has shamed your people for their wrong doing."**

— ARIANNA DAGNINO



Arianna Dagnino in the Nyae Nyae Conservancy with a woman from the the Ju'hoansi clan, Kalahari Desert, Namibia, 1997