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The Good and the Bad: Two Novels of South Africa

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Good and the Bad: Two Novels of South Africa

Carla Hayden (bio) and Helen Kay Raseroka (bio)

The South African situation has unique elements that make it particularly

relevant and potentially enthralling in literature for young people of any culture. Black children, under fourteen years old, are fighting, suffering, and dying throughout South Africa. The nation is engaged in a desperate battle for human rights in which these children are not only active participants, but are even, in some instances, leading the political struggle. If they are not protesting in the urban townships of Soweto or Port Elizabeth, young people are struggling in the rural areas of Qwaqwa or Zululand. The acute political awareness of all South African children, black and non-black, was noted by Robert Coles, who had, in interviewing them, "never heard . . . such a shrewd and knowing appraisal of a nation by 'mere children'" (*The Political Life of Children* 13).

The subject of South Africa is currently being presented in greater, though still comparatively small, numbers of books for children than ever before. Yet, the "we need something on this subject" mentality may prevail once again in a hurried production of a body of fiction about South Africa that is lacking in quality. This is not to deny the responsibility of publishers and authors to keep abreast of current events and provide children timely information on it. However, as we witness the beginning of the treatment of South Africa as a "hot" issue in children's books, we should give renewed consideration to the importance of retaining the main elements of notable fiction in the presentation.

Literary merit and veracity, not only of factual events but also of culture and character, are the basic components which can raise the literature regarding South Africa out of the mire of expediency into the realm of living fiction. Much of what is excellent and poor in the treatment of South Africa in children's literature is evident in two recent novels, *Journey to Jo'burg* by Beverley Naidoo (1986) and *Waiting for the Rain* by Sheila Gordon (1987). To analyze these books is to invite further dialogue regarding the need to present the situation in books that also tell good stories.

Journey to Jo'Burg, written for a middle grade level audience, relates the experiences of a sister, Naledi and her younger brother, Tiro, who travel alone to Johannesburg from a rural South African village. The major

portion of the book is an account of a three day trip to alert their mother of a younger sister's illness. This basic plot has one of the most appealing aspects in fiction for a juvenile audience—the long trek, unescorted and unendorsed, that most surely promises to bring with it unexpected and harrowing incidents along the way. However, *Journey* is riddled with artificial plot devices and weak characters that do not sustain suspense or excitement much less the reader's barest interest.

Naidoo introduces numerous incidents, designed to show the forces of apartheid, without regard to their likelihood in real life. These incidents appear to have little impact on the main characters, and consequently the readers as well. The basic premise of the book, the creation of the need to walk to Johannesburg, is not culturally, or even realistically, plausible. From the outset the decision to walk to Jo'Burg, a distance of over 300 miles, rather than risk the grandmother's wrath for borrowing money to send a telegram stretches one's credulity. In fact, borrowing money for such desperate conditions of serious illness is common in South Africa, and so is sending a telegram. The artificial need does, however, create a vehicle to justify the children's subsequent trip and plot developments. How long will it take to travel to Jo'Burg? Will the sister die before Naledi and Tiro return with their mother?

The author, despite the plot's inherent weakness, could have turned the story into a mythlike trek of action and adventure. Yet "adventure" is what is solely missing. During the journey the children experience few incidents capable of creating dramatic tension. For instance, a hitched ride in the back of a truck produces only...

The Good and the Bad: Two Novels of South Africa

by Carol Heyder and Helen Kay Ruessels

The South African situation has various elements that make it particularly relevant and potentially enlightening to literature for young people of any culture. Black children, under fourteen years old, are fighting, suffering, and dying throughout South Africa. The nation is engaged in a desperate battle for human rights in which these children are not only active participants, but are even, in some instances, leading the political struggle. If they are not protesting in the urban townships of Soweto or Penthekath, young people are struggling in the rural areas of Quthaca or Zoliland. The acute political awareness of all South African children, black and non-black, was noted by Robert Coles, who had, in interviewing them, "never heard... such a serious and knowing appraisal of a nation by 'mere children'" (*The Political Life of Children* 12).

The subject of South Africa is commonly being presented in greater, though still comparatively small, numbers of books for children than ever before. Yet, the "we need something on it" subject mentality may prevail once again in a hurried production of a body of fiction about South Africa that is lacking in quality. This is not to deny the responsibility of publishers and authors to keep abreast of current events and provide children timely information on it. However, as we witness the beginning of the treatment of South Africa as a "hot" issue in children's books, we should give renewed attention to the importance of retaining the main elements of notable fiction in the presentation.

Literary merit and veracity, not only of factual events but also of culture and character, are the basic components which can raise the literature regarding South Africa out of the mire of expediency into the realm of living fiction. Much of what is excellent and poor in the treatment of South Africa in children's literature is evident in two recent novels, *Journey to Joburg* by Berkeley Naledi (1986) and *Wade, for the Rule by Sheila Gwede* (1987). To improve these books is to invite further dialogue regarding the need to present the situation in books that also tell good stories.

Journey to Joburg, written for a middle grade level audience, relates the experience of a sister, Naledi and her younger brother, Tso, who travel alone to Johannesburg from a rural South African village. The major portion of the book is an account of a three day trip to alert their mother of a younger sister's illness. This basic plot has one of the most appealing aspects in fiction for a juvenile audience—the long trek, unescorted and unendowed, that race rarely promises to bring with it unexpected and harrowing incidents along the way. However, *Journey* is riddled with artificial plot devices and weak character traits do not sustain suspense or excitement and add to the reader's forest moment.

Naledi introduces numerous incidents, designed to show the forces of apartheid, without regard to their fit in real life. These incidents appear to have little impact on the main characters, and consequently the readers as well. The basic premise of the book, the evasion of the need to walk to Johannesburg, is not culturally, or even statistically, plausible. From the exact the decision to walk to Joburg, a distance of over 300 miles, rather than risk the grandmother's wrath for borrowing money to send a telegram stretches one's credulity. In fact, borrowing money for such desperate conditions of

agrarian illness is common in South Africa, and so is sending a telegram. The artificial road does, however, create a vehicle to justify the children's subsequent trip and plot developments. How long will it take to travel to Joburg? Will the sister die before Naledi and Tso return with their mother?

The author, despite the plot's inherent weakness, could have turned the story into a riveting trek of action and adventure. Yet, "adventure" is what is sadly missing. During the journey the children experience few incidents capable of creating dramatic tension. For instance, a hitch-hiker ride in the back of a truck produces only this: "Tso began to lean farther out over the side to feel the wind on his face. Naledi called, 'Sit back or you'll fall but her brother took no notice. Suddenly the truck went over a bump and Tso jerked forward. Naledi grabbed him just in time. 'Didn't I tell you?' she shouted over the noise of the 'orry. A little shaker, Tso scrambled 'ere' and settled back properly against the orange sacks. Together they watched the road stretching far over 'colored' there'" (9).

One of the children's acute experiences also gives us the most ludicrous plot manipulation in the story. The police are vaguely introduced by Naledi in Tso's recollection of a popular children's song about the pass-book law enforcement. The police "over raid a train station where the children are being transported with the help of a new friend and adult guardian, Grace. In the ensuing rush and confusion of the crowded train, the children have been separated from their guardian. As they stop in the midst of this predicament, awaiting further caution and foot aside, to walk to a township consisting of hundreds of rows of derelict houses. Once there, these rural town children search for and find, the son of a complete stranger from the area whom they urge to take his fathers pass. Of course, Grace is conveniently present at the station when they return.

The minor characters are used as mere mouth pieces for the author. Grace, the temporary guardian, is a voice of "love" thinking, in contrast to the children's mother, who is unmerciful and hateful. The portrayal of women in general is that of passivity with no much sense. They are incapable of action and they lack persistence. What type of women are these, one the children's grandmother and the other an aunt younger than Naledi's mother, who cannot, between them take a sick child to a hospital and fail to detect the anxiety Naledi's experiencing? Hospital care was within reach. If Naledi's mother could walk back from the hospital so could her aunt or grandmother who is described as being rather fit and hardy. What prevented them from taking care? The need to have the children take a journey perhaps? The characterization of these women ignores the fundamental strength of neighborly support and the network of kinship prevalent in rural settings in South Africa.

The most lamentable flaw in the author's treatment of the characters is the limited development of Naledi. Instead of a sympathetic heroine, we are given an unfulfilled promise. There is also a curious lack of planning for a long journey by a thirteen year old girl who is described as being intelligent. It is unlikely Naledi could get to that age, with a being raised in rural life and "long travel to school" and "blatantly disregard obstacles like food and money." She is not particularly interested in how long the journey might take, nor does she exhibit any apparent sense of possible danger. Her awareness of the 1976 Soweto massacre



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