

## *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*

*The Quiet Violence of Dreams*

by Sello K. Duiker

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Born in 1974, the late Sello K. Duiker was a script writer for e-tv's popular show, *Backstage*. His first novel, *Thirty Cents*, was awarded the 2001 Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book in the African region. *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is Duiker's second book and it was also awarded the 2001 Herman Bosman Prize for English Literature.

*The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is about a journalism student, Tshepo, who is on an involuntary quest of self-discovery. Along his journey he encounters a number of scenarios, rude awakenings, people and situations that make an impact on him in one way or another. Some of the experiences have a positive and some have a negative influence, but all the same, each encounter is necessary and contributes to his overall journey. His best friend, Mmabatho, is an independent female who can be described as a modern woman who sets her own boundaries. She mostly dates white men (perhaps coincidentally), and she subsequently does not think she is racist or discriminatory. But interestingly she sees nothing wrong with calling blacks from outside of South Africa by derogatory terms like 'makwere-kwere'. As the story unfolds she also has her own issues to grapple with, but they are nonetheless not as severe as Tshepo's.

Tshepo is a private individual, and at some point Mmabatho comments on how little she actually knows about him. One cannot blame him for not being open about his life because some of the things that Tshepo

him for not being open about his life because some of the things that Tshepo has experienced would seem farfetched and incredulous to the next person. The elements of his story are: his father is the member of the mafia; the people that murdered his mother were his father's connections; one of the inmates at Valkenberg mental facility that he eventually befriends is actually one of the men who raped and killed his mother; one of his many flatmates (Chris) raped him after he had helped him on numerous occasions; and that he actually works in a massage parlour (Steamy Windows), not a restaurant as he had told Mmabatho; and that he is gay.

*The Quiet Violence of Dreams* is riveting. Duiker's descriptions of Mmabatho's inner thoughts and feelings are uncanny, and one gets the impression that he was once a female himself. He reveals emotions that even women when gathered together, do not disclose to one another. And when they are revealed, it is done so sparingly because on most occasions the individual is uncomfortable and scared to reveal them to herself, let alone other people.

When he writes about the mental facility, Valkenberg, the reader is plunged into the world of the inmates. The feelings of boredom, nothingness, pessimism, doom, and the fact that the institution seems to do more harm than good, are expressed in a manner that makes the reader experience the emptiness and the futility that the inmates feel. These pages are not an easy read and the tedium comes across as incredibly unbearable. The irony about the mental facility is that the inmates are there in the hope of getting better—to find themselves—and thus move on into society and be acceptable and be well-balanced individuals. Instead, they are permanently drugged, and thus numbed into limbo rather than facing their issues.

The doctors diagnose Tshepo as having 'cannabis induced psychosis', and they fail to realise that there are underlying and deeper issues for his state of being. They do not appreciate the fact that he used cannabis to escape or camouflage the pain, the feelings of loneliness and alienation. Tshepo needed to discover who he was and during those moments when he was 'high' he felt like he belonged. He needed to fit in, be part of something, and to some degree he found solace in madness. Duiker poses serious questions about the efficacy of at least some approaches to mental health.

*The Quiet Violence of Dreams* does deal with racial issues, but these are not foregrounded. It is this marginality of racism that brings it to the centre. As much as Tshepo tries to escape or denies that racism still exists, it always seems to slap him in the face one way or another. What Tshepo has managed to achieve is to make sure that racism does control him, and subsequently he does not think about it until it happens. Duiker shows that being constantly angry and consumed by racism can have retarding effects in one's personal growth, as exhibited in Chris. Chris remains bitter, miserable and he blames the system and not himself for what has happened to him and where he is now in his life. Chris's anger about the system is destructive to a point where he is sadistic: he resents Tshepo for being educated.

The book is written in a very accessible style, and Duiker does not hold back on the profanities which make the characters authentic. The way Duiker writes makes one feel part of the story because there is a kaleidoscope of characters: there is a character that each individual can identify with from the range of homosexuals, heterosexuals, mentally ill individuals, criminals, Rasta's, the elite, prostitutes, business men, students, mafia personae, doctors, etc. If some readers have never been 'high' on cannabis, by the time they are done with the book the experience is made real for them. It is indeed a fascinating idea to tell the story as told from the different characters' points of view, i.e. that Tshepo interacts with. This brings to the fore different narratives, not just the one from the main protagonist. One cannot escape the fluctuating emotions encountered by the different characters to a point where this reader at least felt drained by the end of this emotionally demanding book.

