

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *False Bay*

Author: William Dunn

Category: Fiction

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Reviewer: Michail Rassool

Any rank outsider to Cape Town and its multi-layered social dynamics may well ask if so much of it could possibly exist along one little stretch, the ±6,5 km coastal road from Kalk Bay to Muizenberg or, at least, enough to capture the imagination of any self-respecting artist that they would want to enshrine it for posterity.

Dye-hard Capetonians tend to see it as a place where bohemians of every persuasion are to be found, people who add colour, flavour, texture and contour to life – your artists, writers, literati, intellectuals, those steeped in the cosmology of life, organic deviationists, enlightened conservationists – the sort of people who somehow leave their stamp on every aspect of civil life, projecting alternative perspectives that somehow just rub off on those around them through proximity alone. One would naturally assume one such close observer was William Dunn, author of this most compelling read, *False Bay*, who spent many of his formative years along this stretch between mountain and ocean, a sensitive young soul who may well have internalised enough of its diversity to unleash on a worthy outlet later on in life, a work of fiction which amounts to a rather lively and colourful slice of life.

For any novel to work or, at the very least, sustain a reader's interest to the end it must have enough drama, tragedy, twists, not to mention characters worth their weight in salt. As for characterisation there is certainly no shortage of it in *False Bay*. It is mainly the characters'

life experiences, told from their own perspective, chapter by fascinating chapter, that animate the novel, actually constituting it.

They are clearly delineated – colourful and eccentric, each with his or her own story desperately seeking a resolution, happy or not. They range from a 93-year-old psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor dispensing sage wisdom from high up in his grand eyrie on the St James mountainside to the very fallible, troubled souls inhabiting the stretch below to the surfing lesbian couple, a bipolar bibliophile heiress and a nose-bleeding, neurotic gynaecologist, a trans with a non-binary moniker, and a cross-dressing artist and unfulfilled family man and his foetal alcohol syndrome-stricken son, a boy familiar with tragedy, victimhood, even redemption and a certain flamboyant triumphalism, from young.

Each gets a chance to tell their own story, of how they fit individually into this False Bay coastal narrative, a proverbial patchwork quilt of very colourful, yet ineffably tragic, human parts and sometimes not so human. True to its colourful read, life in False Bay can't be complete without a mountainside resident baboon named Shakespeare included in the mix of voices. But then that's just it...

A huge part of False Bay's charm lies in employing elements of fantasy and magic realism, where the living and long-dead co-exist happily without any compunction and non-human voices have an equal weighting, not to mention the real and unreal, literary conventions that have become so synonymous with Latin-American fiction – your Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez – from which other writers have probably found their own authorial voice and defined their *oeuvre* – Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Yann Martel.

The novel clearly distils the writer's profound sense of place with so much else that perhaps gnaws away at his soul, all needing a constructive outlet, including a preoccupation with identity and where one fits into the grand scheme of things. And, lying at the very core of it all is a deep sense of spirituality, the central place in the narrative played by the Catholic Church – and particularly the old parish of St James, the Dominican convent and its schools -- and the irretrievable role it continues to play in that little stretch in all its diversity of outlook, its multifaceted moral prisms, its multiplicity of identities that find a home in it. It is a constant overarching presence that keeps a beady eye regardless as life trundles along on its own terms. Perhaps the author is keen to show that for the Church to stake its own claim in this rather flawed human terrain it needs to be fundamentally flawed itself.

The Church here is not spared from (implied) censure, for being a source of profound pain to so many among those it has served or have served it, an institution that is not without its own sweeping unresolved crises. The writer doesn't balk at weaving controversies such as

child abuse in the Church into his fictional narrative and the way this has been handled globally. Also, the “dark night of the soul” that occurs in many religious vocations, often with catastrophic personal effects for the individual, leading to a sense of exile or marginalisation for some. Profound pain and searing fallibility are threads that run right through the narrative, as lived by the novel’s myriad colourful characters. The author’s fundamental Catholicism perhaps is reflected in the redemption he enables most of the characters in his novel to experience, if not enjoy, a resolution that is often quite messy and even tragic. It’s as if the individual is accorded, yes, the desired *denouement*, but one that is essentially soiled, with massive scar tissue and lines that are neither the neatest nor the straightest. Perhaps he seeks to show that a soul exposed, in all its flawed splendour with all that went before permanently etched in both memory and form, is at its most beautiful.

False Bay is shown also as a landscape apartheid spatial planners couldn’t quite reshape or reconstitute as completely as they wished; somehow its own version of the Cape’s diversity persisted, which perhaps is the author’s nod to the collective sense of injustice that has prevailed some 50 years after the trauma of forced removals, evictions and displacement. Very striking here is an obvious appreciation of the beauty of encounters, across several divides, human and otherwise, living and dead, but what is equally fascinating are the different trajectories of tragedy experienced by each character; and how they experience this, it seems, roughly corresponds with who they are in this rather complex city. Equally significant is the abiding sense one has that somehow being too flamboyantly triumphant and fundamentally flawed warrants being cut down in one’s prime.

Be that as it may, a key *denouement*, or round-off, in the novel is the lessons that are learnt from one to the other, learning from one another’s flaws and (often tragic) life experiences and endings, the prevalence of the idea that life is created for a purpose, mainly to serve others, the living environment, the cosmology so all may have life to the fullest (playing one’s part in Creation), whether through being an inspiration or simply engaging with people where they are (validating them on their terms), all inhabiting the same place, the same ±6,5 km stretch of the False Bay coast.

• **Michail Rassool is a writer and editor based in Cape Town.**