K. Sello Duiker. *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. Kwela, R92.00

Pity the writer who wins a prize for his first novel: whatever he writes after that is bound, by an iron law of literary criticism, to be judged a let-down. K. Sello Duiker, having won the 20001 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in the Africa Region for *Thirteen Cents,* has now tempted providence and the critics by releasing a second novel hard on the heels of the first.

The Quiet Violence of Dreams does not altogether escape the Law of Second Novels. It is, in the first place, almost three times as long as its predecessor, and it needs to be said that it could have been considerably shorter and been considerably the better for it.

Nevertheless, the excessive length is one of the marks of an ambition that has also other, more appealing, effects. Where *Thirteen Cents* confined itself to a narrowly defined society, that of the street people of Cape Town, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* goes indoors, as it were, into the homes, clubs, restaurants of middle-class Cape Town, to reveal a world in some ways as dissolute as that of the child prostitutes of *Thirteen Cents*. Its grown-up protagonist, too, has a much wider reach of experience and emotion than the thirteen-year old narrator of the earlier novel. A cynic might say that the main difference is that the grown-up hustler charges ten times as much as the child for his services, but in fact the greater social mobility of the character generates a much more varied cast of characters and situations.

The structure of the novel, like that of *Thirteen Cents*, is essentially picaresque, which is to say that the plot is dictated by the wanderings of its main character – in this instance, Tshepo, a streetwise and university-educated drop-out, whose progress we follow, from inmate of Valkenberg mental institution (on this showing a positively mediaeval institution), via a lucrative career as male prostitute to assistant in a children's home in Hillbrow.

Duiker's novel is unusual amongst recent South African fiction in not being particularly concerned with race and its concomitant issues: his characters, citizens of the classless and, on this showing, non-racial suburbs of Cape Town like Observatory, mix and match with a refreshing lack of racial consciousness: for once we are in a South Africa not predetermined by its racial history. It does not follow that this is a country of rainbows and harmony: the denizens of Duiker's world are prone to all the depressions and depravities of young urban professionals everywhere, exacerbated in Tshepo's case by a history of domestic violence, culminating, apparently, in the murder of his mother at the behest of his gangster father, an incident that provides such plot intrigue as the novel has.

Duiker has wisely diluted the self-obsessed narrative of Tshepo with that of other characters, notably Mmabatho, a young Sotho woman coming to terms with the reluctance of her German lover to commit himself to the child she is about to have. Her growing estrangement from Tshepo is both a useful register of his assimilation into his chosen way of life, and a necessary distancing device on a protagonist who is prone to long bouts of self-analysis. Similarly, the other characters who appear and disappear, sometimes with disconcerting abruptness, have the double function of rounding out this picture of urban culture, and relativising the solipsism of Tshepo. Some of them, like the queenish Sebastian, have evolved theories of sexuality which form part of the novel's apologia for the trade of prostitution ('Because we are so clear about what we're doing it is sex in its most liberated form because you're not answering to a wife or husband or partner'); some of them, like the butch West, provide romantic interest, affection, a community of tolerance and understanding. Yet others, like the enigmatic Zebron and

the sinister Jacques, remain disturbingly underdeveloped for the significance the plot seems to want to accord them. Here and there, as in the character of Chris, the ex-convict with whom Tshepo falls in love, are reminders of the brutal street world of *Thirteen Cents*; but the novel's special contempt is reserved for the spoilt rich with their 'feline' cars, like Oliver, with his pleasure palace in Llandudno ('At the door a white butler with a haughty look lets us in').

The massage parlour is, perhaps somewhat weirdly, based on the principles of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood – a reproduction of what sounds like Holman Hunt's The Light of the World ('He is calm, vigilant') greets clients in the entrance hall, one wonders with what effect on the Calvinist constitution of some of its clients. If Valkenberg is depicted as the hospital from hell, the Steamy Windows massage parlour is something of a haven of brotherly love. 'You see it isn't so much that we want guys that look good or have nice bodies,' one of his new colleagues explains to Tshepo. 'Anyone can have that. We were looking for something deeper, something real, someone who wants to do something with his life.' It is to the novel's credit that it makes this unusual take on prostitution just about plausible.

The question of sexual orientation, like that of race, is not presented as much of a problem. Somewhere in the course of the novel Tshepo seems to decide that he is gay, without the agonising and existential crises of the average coming-out novel. As in *Thirteen Cents*, the sexual encounters are graphic and forthright. The novel in fact turns into something of a paean to male love, which is a welcome relief from the self-flagellation of so much gay fiction.

This is an attempt to imagine a South Africa in which black and white, gay and straight, co-exist in a loving and mutually supportive community. Inevitably, the attempt has something of the naive about it. Its conclusion is unfashionably upbeat, some would say utopian: 'Great changes await us. All the hatred and disappointment is falling away.'

Still, for all its visionary excess, the novel presents a distillation of an urban sub-culture that is new to South African fiction, and an optimism that is exceedingly rare. For both these reasons it deserves to be read.