

*Shadow Bird* by Willemien le Roux (Kwela Books, R79.95)

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*Shadow Bird* is based on the author's years in the informal settlement of D'kar, Botswana, as a pastor's wife in a community of San people. But it is the author's own story only by indirection: mainly it is a tapestry of stories of representative members of this surprisingly varied community.

Only the first and last stories are told in the first person, from what one takes to be le Roux's own perspective, and only in these stories does she explicitly address the doubts that beset her about her own place in this apparently doomed community, where she is trying to establish self-help projects, while trying also "to understand what it means to live here, in this large, unstructured and mixed community of people who mostly have no other refuge."

It is no exaggeration to say that this collection as a whole is itself part of that attempt to understand, and to make the reader understand, through the artifice of fiction applied to a first-hand knowledge of conditions in this remote and desperate area.

The stories adopt as their focalisers a very wide cross section of the community: Dina the midwife, Turu the artist, Kelebetse the black man with the San mother, X'aga the woman who dies of cancer, Nqaba the woman of easy-morals and beautiful voice, Eric Johan and Peter the young white men charged with raping three San schoolgirls, Mies Bettie the widow deserted by her second husband, Oom Jimmy the white man who has had five San wives. Slowly, from these individual stories, a communal narrative emerges, of the struggle of the San for survival and recognition against the prejudice of black and white alike, of their struggle also against the subversion of the new ways.

If, on the one hand, we are made aware of the sense of injustice felt by the San, or Baswara as they are called by the Batswana, we are also shown, through the eyes of Mhpo, the Motswana teacher, the despair of those trying to encourage the San to develop a sense of their own identity and nationhood: "These people were oppressing themselves. How often had she told them they could change their fate if they stopped thinking and acting so negatively?"

In all of this the Mmamoruti, the pastor's wife, is at most a peripheral presence, useful to give advice on Western matters, or to provide transport in an emergency, tolerated rather than venerated. Le Roux is humble without being abject, determined to be of service without being officious, compassionate without being sentimental or condescending. She accepts that she has a place in Africa, a role to play, but she recognises that the people around her have their own

frames of reference to which hers is not necessarily superior, that she makes as little sense to them as they to her.

A central story in this respect is “Embers in the Milky Way,” in which an old San midwife reflects sceptically on the lessons of the Moruti; secure in her own cosmology, she gives but qualified assent to the Christian message: “Life certainly did not get any better; if it was true that Jesus had brought God closer, wouldn’t He have done something to make things easier for them?”

And as for the Moruti’s wife, she is at most tolerated as a willing servant: being told that the pastor’s wife had also been summoned to help with a difficult birth, the midwife thinks: “As if Moruti’s wife can help! . . . She tried her best to be involved in everything, but she knew so little. It was like teaching a young girl; though she already had three children of her own. Anyway, let her come, she can at least go and find help if we can’t manage with this one, she thought.”

The title story gets its name from “the big, black bird that always flies above the people, looking to cast its shadow over someone,” and it follows from this central metaphor that many of these stories are intensely sad. “Killer Child,” in which a woman chooses to die close to her own people rather than return to hospital, can stand with Pauline Smith’s “The Pain” as an account of inarticulate but unconditional fidelity unto death.

Others, though are lightened by the humour which the San find in their own lives and the author finds in their common situation. In “What’s in a Name,” for instance, Mies Bettie, unbeknownst to herself, hollers an obscenity every time she calls the name of Qgam, the man working for her. But what characterises all the stories is a scrupulous fairness, a wonderfully unjudgemental comprehension of all these lives thrown together so haphazardly.

Both Antjie Krog and Rian Malan are quoted on the cover of *Shadow Bird*, highly commending the book. In a way they are appropriate choices, in that they, too, have written about trying to make sense of living in Africa; but in another way le Roux’s technique is very different from theirs. As the titles of their books indicate (*Country of My Skull*, *My Traitor’s Heart*), Krog and Malan examine South Africa from a perspective to which they themselves are central; whereas le Roux explores the perspectives of others, to which she is at best incidental. And what ultimately brings her to understanding, however tentative, is the artifice of fiction, the need to identify imaginatively with a variety of protagonists, to dramatise the experience of others from the inside.

This wonderful book is a valuable documentary record, but it is also a superb vindication of the power of the fictional imagination. Accepting herself with good humour as a

peripheral but potentially useful presence in the narrative of others, Willemien le Roux teaches us not only how to live in Africa, but how to live in the world.