The Alphabet of Birds by SJ Naudé, translated by the author. Umuzi/And Other Stories

JM Coetzee's 1999 novel, *Disgrace*, may have inaugurated a new genre in South African fiction, what one could call disenchanted realism. After the energy and anger of protest fiction, and the short-lived euphoria of the transition to majority rule, *Disgrace* pictured with pitiless precision the implications for white South Africans of the new dispensation. Almost simultaneously, André Brink published a similarly disillusioned novel, *Rites of Desire*, followed many years later by Nadine Gordimer's *No Time Like the Present*, the grande dame of protest's reluctant disavowal of her erstwhile comrades, in the face of their betrayal of the principles she thought she was fighting for.

Alphabet of the Birds, though not overtly political, may be seen as a continuation of this disenchanted strain. It may also owe something, in its sparse precision, to the prose style of Coetzee; but it is, in conception and execution, wholly its own thing

As Damon Galgut has commented, this is a new voice in South African writing: sophisticated, cool, disenchanted, yes, tough, at times lyrical, at times brutal. It is also a cosmopolitan voice: Naudé spent many years living in London and New York, and his protagonists almost without exception move easily and frequently between countries and continents. There are indeed stories set in the platteland of South Africa, but others range, restlessly and rootlessly, from London to Hanoi to Bavaria to Milan.

The New South Africa, in this version of it, is a country of nomads and searchers. It is also a country that offers little comfort to its discontented children, 'the diaspora of fearful, grim, white children from South Africa'. Naudé, or his fictional persona, refuses to be seduced by the beauty of the South African landscape, the warmth of its people, the richness of its cultural mix, or any of the consolatory myths that we who have opted to remain behind have constructed for ourselves.

But the geographical displacement of most of the characters is really only a symptom of a deeper, metaphysical unease, a not-at-homeness of the psyche as much as of the body. Perhaps the bleakest of the stories, 'Van', also the only one set wholly in South Africa, traces the slow decline into despair of a white woman, Sandrien, trying to alleviate the suffering of the people dying of AIDS around her, in the Eastern Cape countryside. Her husband has to watch helplessly as she cuts off all ties of family and friendship to bring some alleviation of suffering, in the face of mendacious bureaucratic indifference.

A companion story, in a sense, is that of a young South African woman, Ondien, returning from her musicological studies in London with two young black woman musicians, hoping to continue a musical career as an act called, in conscious mock-nostalgia, the Victorian Native Ladies' Society.

The Sandrien and Ondien stories are linked, among other means, by the vivid and sinister presence of Mrs Nyathi, the owner of a 'superior' guest house on the Lesotho border. In Mrs Nyathi, Naudé creates a chilling portrait of a new elite, complacent, callous, exploitative and corrupt. In Sandrien and Ondien he creates the new underclass, utterly estranged from their environment, trying to keep a foothold in Africa.

Whether by accident or design, the stories featuring female protagonists are by far the bleakest. The men have greater freedom of independent action, establishing relationships with a fluidity denied to the women.

It may be pertinent that many of the male characters are gay, and part of a subculture that accommodates such fluidity more readily than straight society. Such moments of heady enjoyment or tenderness as are to be found in this collection are then almost invariably between men.

Thus, in the haunting 'A Master from Germany', the anonymous protagonist has a troubled but at times ecstatic relationship with a charismatic young German baker; and in 'Loose', the (same?) protagonist meets a young dancer who through dancing dissolves something of his tension and dissatisfaction: 'The trust grows swiftly and, as they become more synchronised, all his restlessness and grief dissolve.'

These stories contain a startling beauty, deriving from 'encounters that cause unexpected joy to burgeon between two people': as, in an earlier story, through physical contact, 'Within a split second the entire world falls into place.'

By contrast, all the marriages in the book are dysfunctional, the women generally the victims of psychopathic or possessive or simply insensitive husbands; the only two who seem to be equal partners in a caring relationship are the two lesbians in Milan. One is not left, however, with the impression of special pleading or proselytising: the relationships are depicted with utter authenticity, as they present themselves to the author's creative imagination.

Naudé's relentless depiction of a society in free fall could have been merely depressing, had it not been for the elegance and precision of the writing. Disenchanted realism is not cynicism or nihilism: rather, it registers as a felt absence of some transfiguring experience, which may not arrive but is nevertheless adumbrated – for instance in the cryptic appearances of the eponymous birds, seeming to hint at some other perspective, some mode of understanding that transcends the mundane and the sordid. If the actuality of South African life, as it is imagined in these stories, is dispiriting, it is alleviated by moments of grace, as enigmatic as they are enchanting.

This masterly debut collection garnered praise and awards in its original Afrikaans; now, in a superb translation by the author, it is deservedly accessible to a much larger audience, simultaneously being published in this country and in the UK.