

*The Beneficiaries* by Sarah Penny (Penguin )

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Novels of childhood under apartheid have become a sub-genre of South African fiction: Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*, Damon Galgut's *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*, Jo-Anne Richardson's *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, to mention a few of these, all in one sense or another concerned with the question of how a child is conditioned into accepting as normal an evil system, or else grows up alienated from his or her environment.

To this list of novels Sarah Penny's *The Beneficiaries* is a distinguished addition. It is an unsentimental, unsensational, indeed emotionally rather sparse account of life at a boarding school in the Eastern Cape in 1978 (Kingwilliamstown seems the most likely model, given the reference to a "kaffir bashing society" that starts up in the school). One implication of this account is that the brutal racism that in many other novels is presented as the peculiar prerogative of the Afrikaners was by no means restricted to them.

Sarah Penny is particularly good at anatomising the absurd hierarchies and rituals of a provincial school grimly aping traditions exported from England to this land of hadedas and pineapples. The petty jealousies, the hard-eyed rivalries of school, are contextualised within the racist society that was South Africa, without any simplistic equations or cause-and-effects; and yet, what school and society have in common is a loveless dedication to what it regards as principle, a subordination of humanity to abstractions. Thus the rules governing the movements of a non-prefect through the corridors of power are policed quite as rigorously as the prescriptions of apartheid. Like the other novels mentioned here, *The Beneficiaries* is a rite of passage novel. It traces the coming-to-consciousness of one Lally, the daughter of ostrich farmers, who spends her exeat on the more prosperous angora goat farm Little Kimmeridge, home to Pim, the boy who is to become Lally's first lover. Details of farm life, like the details of school life, are meticulously reproduced, the racial divide made clear without being laboured.

The impingement of the repressive state machinery of the seventies is dramatised in Lally's silent complicity with a young fugitive black activist, the son of one of the 'siesies', the generally invisible and disregarded cleaning women in the hostel. Seeing the young man arrested at the instigation of the three star pupils of the schools becomes for Lally the decisive event in her growing alienation from her peers and parents.

Pim, after a spell on the border, becomes disillusioned with the system in which he too had been a star achiever, and for a while Lally feels that he shares her deep doubt about the meaning of her little society. As almost invariably in the rite-of-passage novel, the coming to adulthood also entails sexual initiation, which is here effected in an unfussed, almost business-like way. Indeed, Lally's growing alienation is reflected also in the cold-bloodedness of her sexual relationships. Going through some old photographs, she reflects dispassionately on an ex-lover: "All she can remember about him is that ejaculated too quickly but didn't seem aware of it, or embarrassed by it, and she recalls being frustrated, sexually, and resentful about the lack of embarrassment."

Lally is not a particularly likeable child – or adult for that matter. Standing apart from her society, she passes judgement on its petty rituals and major misconceptions alike through the nausea that they evoke in her. Considering what she regards as her own unfitness for the normal functions of life, Lally reflects: "What could she ever have

learnt about the gentler rhythms of life in an institution, in an institution that was part of an institution, a layering of institutions, one on top of the other?" And whereas her nausea comes to seem, paradoxically, a healthy reaction to the sickness of her society, there is yet something disturbing about Lally's withdrawal from human contact and communion.

Meeting up with Pim again in London in self-imposed exile, Lally embarks on an adulterous affair with him, more, it would seem, as an attempt to establish some kind of relationship with her past than out of passion. A major achievement of the novel is the rendering of Pim, the expatriate patriot, still reading the Mail and Guardian without any intention of ever returning to his country of birth, his liberal revolt against the apartheid regime now indistinguishable from the commonplaces of English fairplay. Like so many political émigrés before him, Pim has settled into a comfortable British existence, frankly relieved at not having to deal with South Africa's problems in any direct way: "An English father, in England."

In order to liberate herself from her own emotional deadness, Lally has to heed the letter which arrives from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission asking her to testify in the hearing into the disappearance of the young black activist. Initially reluctant to become part of a process and "a terminology of which the divisions are unclear to her – victims, perpetrators, beneficiaries", by the end of the novel she is preparing to return to South Africa to face her own past as Beneficiary. In an impressively muted ending, she re-assumes responsibility for her life.

Incidentally, now that David Philip, Jonathan Ball and other local publishers are producing handsomely bound books on quality paper, it seems anomalous that Penguin should not be able to come up with anything better than a generic Image Bank cover and what looks and feels like recycled newsprint. It's a disservice to a fine novel to be sent out into the world looking like this.