

*The Club* by Edyth Bulbring (Jonathan Ball) R164

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*The Club* purports to be a school story, but don't expect a rollicking tale of adolescent mischief, eccentric teachers and jolly hockey sticks. This is not Greyfriars nor even St Trinian's: it is St Patrick's in Johannesburg, and it is the pits.

Not that the parents who pay huge sums to have their offspring educated there suspect that it is anything but the model establishment that it is advertised as: on the surface all is decorous, St Patrick's having a 100% pass rate in matric, and a 98% university exemption rate. The new headmaster, Dr Mzi Cawe, has an impressive list of qualifications, and seems well set to drag St Patrick's into the twenty-first-century, against the inclinations of fuddie-duddies like Brother Peter, one of the relics of the school's Catholic past. But from the very opening of the novel we are warned that things are not as they seem, as Brother Peter visits an ex-colleague, Brother Tommy, in a mental institution, to which, we gather, he was driven by the deviltry of teenagers.

We are soon enough introduced to the teenagers in question: the Club of the title turns out to be the Ess Club, an elite secret group dedicated unflinchingly to their own advancement at the expense of everybody else. The Ess of their name refers to the fact that the inner circle consists of seven supreme members. We are also tipped off that amongst them they cover pretty much all of the seven deadly sins. One of the minor pleasures of the novel is trying to match up each character with his or her besetting sin. The Ess Club is run ruthlessly on corporate lines, with each Executive member taking charge of one portfolio of what is in fact a highly lucrative concern. Like any efficient corporation, the Club offers a diversity of products, from drug-pushing to teacher-fixing to exam-paper providing. New members are stringently screened, and any offence against the creed of the Club is mercilessly dealt with. The Club also seems to be an exemplary exponent of Black Empowerment: though the members' race is to some extent concealed behind their business names, one gathers that the club's demographic is pretty representative of the country's.

At the centre of the novel's busy plot is Mammuso, a leading member of the club, in line for election to the supreme position of Chair at the end of the year. Mammuso is in tense rivalry with Nzie, whose besetting sin is not difficult to spot: he once date-raped Mammuso, and seems now to have set his sights on Jacob, Mammuso's younger brother. Mammuso, who is not as horrible as she makes out, tries to save her brother from Nzie's machinations and the Club's punitive measures.

The novel works very well at the level of a simple intrigue. The action is fast and the machinations are ingenious, working up to a good old bang at the end. But it soon becomes evident that Bulbring is more ambitious than this: the novel is also a savage parable of the New South Africa and its corrupt ruling classes. The sassy, street-smart pupils (it would be more than usually inaccurate to call them 'learners') refer to four-by-fours as Yengenis; an alcoholic bender is a Manto. The principal turns out to have failed Standard Eight and to have forged all his qualifications. The Club's sole aim is to make money as quickly as possible, though one could argue that the members get a purely non-mercenary kick out of being unpleasant. Old style white liberals are despised and conspired against; a new teacher, the unfortunate-looking Ostrich, is contemptuously referred to as 'one of those teachers who enjoy teaching'.

Mammuso's father is a fat and flourishing corporate type who divides his time between drinking whisky with his mates and bedding nubile young upwardly-mobile women. Her grandfather, a relic of a more traditional value system is ineffectual and powerless. Brother Peter, clinging on to the school's Catholic identity, is patronisingly sidelined by the new dispensation and its chummy relations with 'old' money. These children, the implication runs, are not the devil-spawned offspring of blameless parents: they are merely perpetuating the values they have imbibed at home. We are told about Cherry, the young alcoholic in charge of the Club's Security: "Cherry knows about gangs. Her family runs one. Her brothers and cousins are everywhere. In the police, in the courts, in the bureaucracies – and now, thanks to Cherry, in the schools."

*The Club* does not always make for pleasant reading – the characters are, with few exceptions, so unpleasant that spending time with them is a trial – and its implication is profoundly depressing: our new elite is quite as corrupt as the old one ever was, and has lost any touch it once had with values like liberation and democracy. The good news is that there seems to be no racial divide; the bad news is that everybody's united in screwing everybody else.

But for all its dispiriting implications, *The Club* is a racy and invigorating read. One gets to care just enough for Mammuso to root for her, and somehow some human decency does survive in the midst of the wheeling and dealing. We can only hope that that, too, is an accurate reflection of our morally bankrupt fat-catocracy.