Zebra Crossing by Meg Vandermerwe (Umuzi, R190)

Review: Michiel Heyns

It is one of the surprising aspects of Meg vandermerwe's debut novel that her main character and narrator, a young albino Zimbabwean girl adrift in Cape Town at the time of the World Cup, should be reminiscent of the most demure of Victorian heroines. In her self-denying, self-effacing timidity she recalls such outsider figures as Charlotte Brönte's Jane Eyre or Charles Dickens's Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. (The fact that Dickens is mentioned twice may suggest that the author was aware of this connection.)

But if there is indeed this parallel, its significance may lie in the point at which the lines diverge: whereas the Victorian heroine typically overcomes her undervalued state to marry the man she has quietly been in love with for several hundred pages, Chipo – well, suffice it to say that her novel does not end on wedding bells and general merrymaking.

Vandermerwe, then, has succeeded in welding an adapted marriage plot to a far grimmer form, the immigrant-narrative, and to adapt the Victorian social-problem novel to South African realities. She gives us a very recognisable Cape Town: the novel's main locale, President's Heights, is a thinly disguised version of the slum block, Senator Park on Long Street, now being refurbished. Here Chipo and her brother, George, sharing a single room with two other Zimbabweans, the brutish Peter and the gentle David, come up against the rigours of émigré life: the crowded accommodation, the exploitation by locals and fellow-émigrés, the long, futile waits at Home Affairs and above all the xenophobia. The émigré community is abuzz with rumours that they are being tolerated only until the closing match of the World Cup, after which they will 'burnt'.

Chipo, as an albino, is up against a double prejudice: not only is she a *makwerekwere*, she is also a 'monkey' or 'sope', as albinos are called in Zimbabwe. And, as a young woman, she is subordinate and subservient to her demanding brother and the other males in in the makeshift household.

Her life is made tolerable by the kindness of David and the concern of Jean-Paul, the reclusive tailor from Rwanda, with his own memories of atrocities. Indeed, such joy as she has is provided by her fantasies of being loved by David, and by the new clothes that Jean-Paul insists she wear.

A pitfall of the first-person narrative of a self-denying person, such as Dickens's Esther and Vandermerwe's Chipo, is that the voice may come to seem self-pitying, even a bit self-admiring: 'My hands smell of Omo and my skin is red and irritated,' Chipo reports. 'When there is money I must ask George to buy me a pair of rubber gloves.' Or: 'Little Sister's job is to cook and clean, not to to stick her nose where it does not belong.'

In Dickens's time, this subservience was, by and large, expected of the dutiful Angel in the House; and in some traditional societies this would still seem to be the case. But the modern reader may feel a slight impatience with this passive

acquiescence to servitude, and wish, at times, that Chipo would show more gumption.

But it is one of the grimmer (and neater) ironies of this novel that Chipo's attempts at self-assertion should turn out to be disastrous. As a naïve eighteen-year old, she cannot see what the reader realises from very early on: David is not interested in her or in any other woman, because he is in love with his colleague Jeremiah.

Her discovery of this brings out the latent intolerance underlying her subservience: her homophobia is every bit as virulent and vindictive as the prejudice that she has had to deal with all her life. Her recitation of pejorative terms for homosexuals neatly but unwittingly parallels her earlier catalogue of pejorative terms for albinos. And her attempt to ruin David's relationship is as cruel and self-seeking, and ultimately as catastrophic, as anything else in this dark novel.

This is a courageous implication, and not one that Dickens would have allowed himself: the downtrodden, in seeking to claim their due, may be quite as ruthless as the rich and powerful. That Chipo's cruelty is the largely unwitting outcome of her naivety and her loneliness does not extenuate her guilt or alleviate its consequences: by a final irony, the worst disaster to strike the little group of émigrés is brought about, not by xenophobia, but by a combination of Chipo's blundering neediness and her brother's greed.

As this incomplete summary will indicate, *Zebra Crossing* is not a heartening novel. For South Africans, it provides an unflattering view of their country and its vaunted *ubuntu*. For Africans from other parts of the continent, it provides little hope of a better future here. Reading it, however, is not as dispiriting an experience as this may suggest: the plot, if somewhat contrived at times, moves at a brisk pace, and the characters have a vivid believability. Chipo, in particular, is a fine study of an immature, emotionally hungry young girl.

It would seem, then, that South African realities don't allow the novelist the happy endings that Dickens and Brontë contrived for their heroines. It is no reflection on this novel's bleak realism to say that we can only hope that our continent will one day provide the substance for a more affirmative vision.