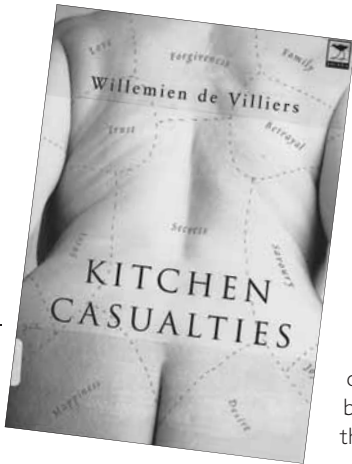


Kitchen casualties

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Reviewer



The cover of **Kitchen casualties** shows the torso of a middle-aged woman. She is lying on her stomach, and her gently ageing skin has been mapped into sections tattooed with the words: love, forgiveness, family, trust, betrayal, secrets, sweet, savoury, sex, happiness, desire, joy.

In her first novel South African writer Willemien de Villiers takes these themes and concepts and in **Kitchen casualties**, she presents us with: 'the outcome of words left to simmer for hours' - a richly satisfying, tenderly-spiced amalgamation of beauty, poignancy, self-realisation and love.

*The female Vapourer moth, my husband once told me, is wingless, and all she ever does is wait. This is a fact.
 'She emerges from her cocoon, and immediately produces a scent that a male can smell five kilometres away.' Fact.
 'You'll find these moths on hazel and hawthorn trees. Another fact.
 'What happens after mating?' I asked?
 'She lays hundreds of eggs on top of her own discarded cocoon. And then she dies. Having no wings, she has no choice.'
 'She can't escape her destiny and fly away?'*

With these words we are introduced to Isabel Stone, granddaughter of Gloria, daughter of Ruth and mother of Morgan. Long before her birth a chain of events is set into motion which culminates in the perpetration of terrible misdeeds.

Morgan is about to leave for Scotland, and preparations are underway for her farewell party, an event that will bring all four generations together. But before this happens, there are things to be done and stories to be told. **Kitchen casualties** takes us into the

lives of Gloria, Ruth, Isabel and Morgan as they prepare for the party. Each is given the opportunity to tell her story. As they speak, snapshots of the past are pulled from memory - snapshots that help the reader understand the complexities of present.

An unacknowledged truth lies at the core of this novel. **Kitchen casualties** shows how truth is forced into hiding and accused of being false. This becomes a legacy passed from mother to daughter, shaping and colouring their relationships with each other. Is this to be their destiny forever, or can this chain be broken and the truth be set free, allowing them the chance to fly?

The kitchen is a pivotal point in this novel, the place where wonderful meals are prepared, but food becomes a poor substitute for ill-nourished souls. **Kitchen casualties** is set in the Cape, and juxtaposed with kitchen scenes is the sound of the sea singing its way through the pages. There is a sense of harmony and rightness that comes from the study of nature, which contrasts strongly with a realisation of what happens when life is thrown out of kilter by unnatural conduct.

Other balances are explored in this novel. **Kitchen casualties** spans almost a century and shows how fast attitudes and perceptions have altered in many spheres of life. The easy give and take of good relationships is set against the unevenness and imperfections of poor marriages, the shifting interaction between husband and wife, mother and daughter, daughter and father come into play. The looming menace of change threatens a hard-won equilibrium and change, as always, becomes a catalyst, stirring up the shadows of the past and forcing them to release their grip.

In one scene in **Kitchen casualties**, Isabel finds her tongue tied 'into a knot' as she struggles to translate the Afrikaans word *bredie*, as it appears in a poem by Thérèse Bartman. 'I continue my search', she says, 'turning words over like stones, looking for scorpions or treasures underneath.'

I am left with a similar feeling after reading **Kitchen casualties**. I cannot begin to tell of the treasures that lie in store for the reader, nor can I describe the sting that waits in the tail of the scorpion.