

BETWEEN THE LINES — PHAKATHI KWEMIGCA



Cecily van Gend

It is that time of year again, when I look back at what I have read over the past year, and share with you some of the books I have enjoyed. These are not necessarily recently published works, although many of them are, and I do not pretend that they are all great literature. They are simply books that I have found absorbing and satisfying.

I think that top of my list for 2006 has to be **A history of love** by Nicole

Krauss. This is a tale with a complicated plot and two protagonists. The first is the 80-year-old Leon Gursky, who once wrote a novel, now lost, called **A history of love**, about a girl called Alma, whom he had loved in his youth. The other protagonist is a young girl called Alma, living in present-day New York, and named after the heroine of that lost novel. It is about love in all its forms, and it is also about longing and loss, and life and death, and most importantly, about survival. It is a wonderfully

warm, very entertaining read about a very serious subject. It is both happy and sad, and funny, in the way Jewish humour is funny.

I have not yet read **The inheritance of loss**, which has just won the Man Booker, but I would have put my money on **Theft**, by Peter Carey, who has already won the award twice. Tony Morphet, in his review in the **Sunday Independent**, describes it as 'a story of art, fakery, love, murder - and Australia.' In his wonderful, exuberant prose, Carey sends up the contemporary art scene, leading the reader on a romp that begins in the Australian town of Bacchus Marsh, and progresses, via Tokyo, to New York and back to Sydney.

Last year I was blown away by David Mitchell's **Cloud atlas**, so I was delighted to discover a new novel by this wonderfully versatile writer. **Black swan green** is set in a small English village in the 80s, and views Thatcher's Britain through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old boy. Mitchell vividly evokes the agonies of adolescence, family tensions, school bullying, the class system, and English village life, set against the background of the Falklands War.

I always enjoy Kent Haruf's quietly understated novels about small-town middle America. **Where you once belonged** again recreates this

atmosphere of underlying tension which belies the apparently calm, surface of these seemingly uneventful lives.

I think of Alison Lurie as the twentieth century Jane Austen of American academia. In **Truth and consequences** she does her usual witty and perceptive take on the petty rivalries, jealousies and marital peccadilloes that occupy the lives of the inhabitants of a college campus.

I was hugely impressed with Andrew Taylor's **Coldsleep lullabye**, which won the Sunday Times Alan Paton award for fiction. It has been described as a crime novel, but it is far more than that. Set in Stellenbosch, the action alternates between a contemporary murder investigation and conditions in the seventeenth century vineyards surrounding the town. In beautifully-modulated prose, it explores the darker workings of the human psyche, and reveals the complexities of our society with its roots in the colonial past. The **Sunday Times** judges called it 'an ambitiously conceptualised novel in which contemporary South Africa and its colonial past are narrated along parallel and intersecting lines' and describe the writing as 'precise and poetic in the way in which it draws the reader into the drama of a society and people on the cusp of change.'

Another very literary whodunit, which seems to have slipped onto the local scene almost unnoticed is Jane Taylor's **Of wild dogs**. It would appear to have received surprisingly little attention for such a thoughtful and beautifully-crafted work, and so I take delight in singing its praises here. The scene of the crime is the South African Museum in Cape Town, where the returned exile, Hannah Viljoen, museum curator and illustrator, dies in a display case while preparing an exhibition of wild dogs. The crime is unravelled by her ex-lover, Ewan Christopher, a British journalist, together with Inspector Cicero Matyobeni, and pathologist Helen deVilliers. The action moves from Cape Town to Limpopo Province, where two women are mapping the movements of the wild dogs, and getting in the way of the plans of a mining consortium.

And since we seem to have moved onto one of my favourite genres, I must mention a new crime writer I have recently discovered. Peter Temple is a South African now living in Australia. **The broken shore** is set in a small coastal town in Australia, with a disaffected cop (they always seem to be at odds with mainstream society), and involves a murder, bent cops, racism and paedophiles. The author is an accomplished writer who succeeds in portraying the ugly underbelly of the so-called 'lucky country', while at the same time evoking the Australian character and the landscape in economical and sensitive prose.

One of my favourite countries to visit is Italy, and I enjoy the wryly witty and cynical police procedurals of Andrea Camilleri. They are set in Sicily, and feature the deliciously funny Inspector Montalbano

and his team of anti-establishment cops. In **Excursion to Tindari**, hampered by bureaucracy and sustained by superb cuisine, he once again uncovers a nest of intrigue and corruption, featuring prominent government officials and the New Mafia.

And on to my other favourite topic: food. I do not normally mention cookbooks in this column, although I am an avid collector and reader of books about food. I make an exception for the work of Nigel Slater; however, since he is more than just a cook - he is also a very good writer, in the mould of Elizabeth David and MFK Fisher. He is passionate about what he calls 'real food', which really means food that is simple, seasonal, fresh and not over-processed. His enthusiasm for and descriptions of food can make your mouth water for something as basic as sausage and mash. His autobiography, **Toast: the story of a boy's hunger**, won the Glenfiddich Award and the Andre Simon Memorial Prize. It is a hilarious account of his early food experiences in middle-class midlands Britain in the sixties. His latest work, **The kitchen diaries**, has a permanent place at my bedside. For a year he kept a diary of what he shopped for, cooked and ate every day, with actual photographs that have not been styled or artificially dressed up, but are nevertheless beautiful in their elegance and simplicity. His policy was to use local shops and markets, entering supermarkets as little as possible. I read it for inspiration, and for the sheer pleasure of his writing.

On a slightly lighter note, I enjoyed Anthony Capella's **The food of love** a racy and entertaining tale of an Italian cook who falls in love with a girl, and woos her by proxy with his food.

I thought I would end by telling you what I plan to read next: they are waiting on my bedside table, but I have not got to them yet.

At the moment I am busy with Azar Nafisi's **Reading Lolita in Tehran**. The author, now living in the United States, describes how she and a group of her woman students from the University met once a week to read and discuss 'subversive' works of European literature. It is a fascinating account of the lives of women under the stifling and repressive regime of the Ayatollahs.

A while ago I started reading Nobel prizewinner Orhan Pamuk's **Snow**, but had to return it, regretfully, before I had finished it. Now I have **The black book**, which I look forward to. I also look forward to Kiran Desai's **The inheritance of loss**, which won this year's Man Booker. I have been lent a copy of Bill Buford's **Heat** - set in a New York restaurant and then in a butcher's shop in Tuscany. The lender could not stop raving about it. And then there is Imran Coovadia's **The green-eyed monsters**. I thoroughly enjoyed his first novel, **The wedding** a couple of years ago, and this looks equally promising.

With this feast of reading matter, I am going to have a great Christmas break. To all of you out there, have a wonderful festive season, and Happy Reading!