Cecily van Gend

Finuala Dowling is a writer living in Kalk Bay. She is the author of two delightfully quirky volumes of poetry: **I flying,** and the **Doo-wop girls of the universe**, and has also written two novels. I have just finished reading her latest novel, **Fly-leaf,** which chronicles the efforts of Violet to recover from ten years of marriage to the flamboyant and self-centred actor, Frank. She is roosting in the Bird House in Kalk Bay with her childhood friend, the promiscuous and indolent Marina, and Marina's teenage son, Leo, eking out a living as a paid-by-the-hour English teacher at the United College in Rondebosch.

The work is charmingly rambling, as though the reader is privy to the pages of her diary, as she notes down her thoughts on what goes on around her, the eccentric characters who populate the seaside village, and the happenings at the college where she teaches. It is held together by the theme of language, the language Violet tries to instil in her students, and that becomes a metaphor for her own efforts at survival.

Violet believes that 'learning is something that takes place when you're not even aware of it, when you're having so much fun (or, in the case of life, pain) that knowledge rushes your fortress'; so she 'taught in these brief chinks, in the interstices of the lesson'. She is inspired in this view by her English lecturer at university, who was renowned for 'lectures that were more like fascinating conversations with a stranger who takes you into a garden at night and tells you secrets that make you laugh and exclaim so that the guests still inside, in the stuffy party, call out enviously: "What are you two talking about"?' This is true of Violet's lessons at the college, where her colleagues comment, somewhat enviously, on the laughter frequently emanating from her classroom.

She is constantly on the lookout for appropriate and memorable examples to illustrate various language concepts required by the syllabus. One night she is woken by a loud crash from the adjacent bedroom, where Marina is entertaining one of her lovers. 'Marina told me in the morning they hadn't had time to get his suitcase off the bed, and so it had fallen noisily to the floor.' Violet pounces on this statement to illustrate sentence construction: 'Marina and the IBM man (SUBJECT) didn't have enough time to get (VERB) his suitcase (OBJECT) off the bed (ADVERBIAL). In a grammar classroom she notes, 'you could talk about the wonder of this sentence. Notice how we don't have to be told why Marina and the IBM man didn't have enough time to get the suitcase off the bed. This is because meaning exists also in lacunae, in the things we do not say.'

Later, she finds another good SVOA sentence in the promiscuous behaviour of Wanda, a well-known Kalk Bay inhabitant: 'The local bicycle found someone to snog with at the bar.'

In explaining the relative pronoun, (after a question from the good-looking Tertius: 'Is a relative pronoun a word like "uncle" or "aunt"?'), she writes on the board: 'Tertius is surrounded by pretty girls who look at him admiringly.' Drawing an arrow from 'who' across to 'pretty girls', she comments: 'I told them that the relative pronoun - the sheer complexity of it and the ease with which ordinary speakers apply it correctly - is one of the strong arguments for believing that we humans are wired for language.'

She notes how 'These days, most students run the words "as well" together, because that's how they hear them.' [I have noticed this phenomenon too - it seems to be a generational thing - and the emphasis is now on the first syllable: *a*swell. CvG]

Later, she plans to discuss language change with her class, explaining how 'the word "nickname" migrated from "an ekename" (an "also name")'. She decides she will get them to 'repeat the word very fast, but gradually dropping the schwa [I had to look up the word schwa - it is a central vowel. CvG] and running the indefinite article hard against the vowel until the modern word emerged. It was what they were doing with "aswell".

She also discusses how the meaning of the word 'silly' 'drifted from its original sense of 'innocent' to 'weak', in an interesting semantic shift brought about because the innocent are often vulnerable. From 'weak' it was an easy hop to 'ignorant', ending where we are now: 'foolish'.

She learns from her students, too: 'Simon and Oliver discussed the word "fully" as in "[I] fully [support what you have just said]".' They informed me that "fully" was rapidly being superseded by "word". As a rejoinder, "word" meant "well said".' Violet likes that: 'Word is a lovely word.'

In one of her classes she discusses features of South African English - words like dwaal, dagga, lobola, and phrases like holding thumbs, and monkey's wedding. One of the students comments: 'But that's just slang. We're supposed to be learning proper English', and Violet explains that 'What begins as slang or an outlandish borrowing might end up in the lexicon, and that slang is still language, however we may be conditioned to disapprove it.' She then goes on to quote Carl Sandburg who called slang 'language which takes off its coat, spits on its hands - and goes to work'.

She has left Frank because of his affair with the glamorous and pregnant Isabella. This seems very unfair, since Frank has always resisted the idea of children: 'Let's never have children', he says to Violet, 'let's keep it just you and me.' Then, one evening in the Bird House, while watching television, she and Marina see Frank and Isabella on the screen, arriving at a Johannesburg première, and she watches wistfully as Frank 'reached across to touch her belly as the camera caught the moment of intimacy'. Marina, more practical than Violet, remarks: 'I take comfort from the fact that even actors aren't exempt from sleepless, crying, ear-infected, teething, feverish, projectile vomiting babies. Frank's suffering is about to begin. I don't say this as a

curse: I merely take comfort in the way the universe creaks and shifts its weight.'

Gradually, Violet puts her shattered life back together. By the time the divorce is finalised, she is able to invite Frank to join her and Marina at their celebratory lunch, complete with expensive champagne, even though 'He had to leave before the bill came.' Earlier, we had learnt that Frank's nickname in the local pub had been Crime - because *Crime doesn't pay*.

And the universe does indeed creak and shift its weight in Violet's favour. By the end of the school year, she and Marina are planning to open a bookshop in Kalk Bay, to be called Flyleaf; and there are romantic prospects on the horizon: a witty flirtation with Ralph, son of the local Lady of the Manor, and overtures from Liam, the rather hunky law lecturer at the college.

Read this gently satisfying novel for its quirky take on life, and for its insights into language and the way we communicate.