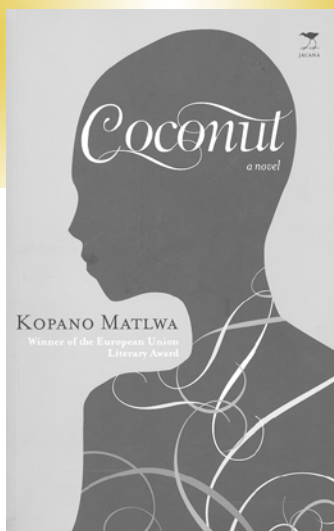


Coconut



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Each year, the Goethe-Institut in Germany awards a prize, the European Union Literary Award, for the best first novel by a South African. This year, the third since its instigation, the award was given to 21-year-old University of Cape Town medical student, Kopano Matlwa, for her novel **Coconut**.

Wordsworth Books, who hosted the Cape Town launch of the novel, announced the event by saying: 'An exciting young voice has emerged that reflects the idiosyncratic nature of our young democracy.' **Coconut** is a story that deals with growing up as a black child in a white world. It is the story of

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black youth who grow up in white neighbourhoods, go to private schools and have white friends. As is the case with any child, all that these children want is to grow, to be loved; but most importantly, to fit in. Fitting in, however, comes at the cost of one's blackness - too white for black, and too black for white.

The EU Literary Award jury gave this citation:

'Narrated from a teenager's perspective, Kopano Matlwa's **Coconut** is an audacious, lyrical and passionate tale. It explores the grey, in-between, intimate experiences and dilemmas of a young girl who, like the society around her, is undergoing changes that call old boundaries, comforts and certitudes into question.'

Speaking at the launch, the novel's editor, Ron Irwin, had this to say about the work: 'When Russell Martin and Bridget Impey at Jacana asked me to prepare **Coconut** for publication, I was given my first assignment as a freelance literary consultant after leaving the University of Cape Town.

'So, this book has a special resonance for me, and I am probably overprotective of it. As such, it was a special pleasure to learn that this was the EU Literary Award winner, and that respected writers

Fred Khumalo, Bheki Peterson and Darryl Accone had been so impressed by this narrative which offers us an important literary landmark: the writer, who is, amazingly, only 21, offers us our first impressions of what it is like to grow up in a free South Africa from the point of view of people who are clumsily referred to nowadays as "previously disadvantaged". I found myself working a great deal on this manuscript at home, and troubled by the characters and the situations that Kopano describes with such flair. The book offers us two interlinked stories: one from the point of view of rich, pampered Ofilwe and her brother Tshepo who struggle to fit into a privileged but soulless world while her mother attends endless tea parties

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and her father plays endless rounds of golf. Ofilwe's is the first generation that can say it has a distinct class of truly rich, professional black people who have been thrust into the highest echelons of privilege in South Africa's suburbia. Ofilwe discovers a surprisingly vapid world, a world that seems stripped of the promise it was meant to hold, a world that is, to use an overused and misused term, without a soul. Ofilwe lives in this world with a belief that there must have been another culture to which she might belong. I was reminded of a person who grows up without the use of a limb: surely the body would have some deep recollection of what it might be like to use a hand or an arm that was subtracted at birth? There is a knowledge that a generation ago - which for any kid, anywhere, may as well have been eons ago - there was something more to life than the fenced-in existence of the suburbs, yet all evidence seems to dispute this. And in an unspoken way she shares this sense of alienation with Fiks, a young, ambitious go-getter from the township who, unlike Ofilwe, wants to embrace the glossy sophistication that Ofilwe has thrown at her feet.

'But Fiks is quickly consumed by what she finds north of the ring road: a world of vapidness, petty snobbery and manipulation, where dreams seem to die in the face of cynicism and brutal reality. Fiks's embrace of what she sees as "white" culture is the embrace of the two dimensional ads she has learned by rote: at age fifteen, this township girl could tell you what to pack for a trip to the Bahamas, yet she herself does not own a pair of jeans and sleeps on the floor to avoid molestation by her uncle.

'Ultimately, disturbingly, these are not simply the first reports from white South Africa from the up and coming black generation. Instead, these are a subtle indictment of the materialism of the New South Africa, where the immorality of apartheid has been traded

for the amorality of the money culture. They are disturbing and brutal stories to be sure, but as Kopano says at the end of her novel, "It is our story, told in our own words as we feel it everyday".

Also speaking at the launch, Kopano explained what it was that had prompted her to write the novel: 'I suppose I should start by telling you all a little bit about myself. I am a student, studying medicine at UCT. I am originally from Johannesburg where all my family still is. I have a younger sister and brother and a wonderful set of parents who have helped me to get to where I am today. And, more relevantly, I am a product of the new South Africa.

'Well, I wrote the book because someone had to. It is a tricky thing to be a young person growing up in South Africa. If you are fortunate you are sent to good schools, you grow up in good neighbourhoods, you live the good life, but good in our setting so happens to translate into white. So with all that goodness comes a great loss of your blackness. Increasingly we have young African

boys and girls who know nothing of what it means to be Zulu or Xhosa or Tswana, who are completely unable to speak to their grandparents and less fortunate relatives because they no longer know the languages, who cannot tell you very much about their heritage or traditional rites, and it really is a tragedy for us all as a people. There is so much richness in all that is African and yet we watch and even help it dilute with every generation.

'So **Coconut** was my attempt at exploring these issues. Initially for myself as a young person in no way immune to the pressures of today, but eventually for anyone really who cares even just a little bit about what will one day become of us as African people.

'**Coconut** is two stories in one. Ofilwe's story and Fikile's story. Two young girls growing up in today's world, one trying to find her way back to her roots, the other running away from it. It is quite an easy read, written to speak to any South African regardless of their background. And as I have travelled a bit and met with other people

from different countries it has become more apparent that these issues are not unique to South Africa and that the pressures of Westernisation are felt throughout the world, so I think **Coconut** has an even wider appeal than I initially had imagined. **Coconut** does not try to give any solutions, in fact it asks more questions than it answers, but what it does try to do is get us talking as a people about this. And if people are talking, they are thinking, and I think that's a good place to start.

'So I do hope you will all read it, and talk about it, and think about it a little and maybe somebody will come up with something clever that will save us all.'

The book has enormous relevance for all of us living in South Africa today, and can only contribute to a greater understanding of what it means to be a young person in this very exciting, but difficult time in our history. As she says, we need to think about and talk about these things. So read the book.