

### **Each Mortal Thing.**

Michiel Heyns.

Cape Town: Umuzi, 2023. 222 pp.

ISBN 9781776380152.

Michiel Heyns's tenth novel, *Each Mortal Thing*, explores the complexity of human (and non-human) connection, inviting readers to consider how we are challenged and changed by chance encounters with others and how our relationships shape who we become. The character Terence Winshaw, a South African expatriate, and university lecturer now living in London, explains identity as "[...] what we find out in getting to know someone, getting to find common ground or mutually enriching differences; it's a process of discovery and education" (171). As we trace the relationships which have shaped and continue to shape Terence, we are also forced to grapple with ideas regarding emigration, xenophobia, racism, sexuality and identity.

Natasha de Villiers, a young South African writer from Beaufort West in the Karoo, is nominated for the prestigious Elizabeth Gaskell Prize for her novel *In the Shadow of the Milkbush*. In her novel she reimagines Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* from the perspective of a marginal(ised) character—a female farm labourer of colour. She travels to London for the award ceremony and is met at Heathrow airport by Terence, her former lecturer, and the person responsible for passing her manuscript along to the publisher. Shortly before the ceremony, a venomous review is published which all but accuses Natasha of plagiarism and dashes her hopes of receiving the Gaskell Prize. Natasha's return home is marred by tragedy, forcing Terence to confront the unintentional consequences of his actions.

It is interesting to note that the noxious review of Natasha's novel may have its roots in the actual controversy surrounding Heyns's translation of Willem Anker's novel *Buys: 'n Grensroman* (2014) (translated title: *Red Dog*), where a reviewer, like "the little shit" (57) in *Each Mortal Thing*, suggested that Anker's use of another text amounts to plagiarism (see George Berridge's review, "Appropriation or plagiarism? Booker novel poses difficult question"). In *Each Mortal Thing*, Natasha translates two passages from Schreiner's novel into Afrikaans which are translated back into English by Sonja Bester, Natasha's friend and translator. Instead of a "fascinating exercise" (32) in translation, as Sonja sees the matter, the reviewer depicts Natasha as duplicitous and unworthy of the Gaskell Prize. The quiet devastation caused by Natasha's disqualification is offset by the humour of Heyns's intertextual play

with both Schreiner and the contentious review of Anker's novel.

The problem of appropriation, apart from Natasha's indebtedness to Schreiner, is perversely encountered in the character of Sonja Bester, who attempts to appropriate Natasha's memories. Armed with Natasha's diary, she visits London with intimate details of Natasha's trip and she tries to relive her friend's journey as a type of revenge pilgrimage down to the last detail. Sonja's characterization as a bloodthirsty siren is both disturbing and amusing. While devouring a bloody steak, she tries to coerce Terence into having sex with her, implicating him in her perverse reenactment of Natasha's memories and appropriation of her life. She also sets her sights on Jason Brownlee, the reviewer responsible for the withdrawal of Natasha's Gaskell Prize nomination. Although we are never shown the punishment he is meted out, the formidable Sonja promises to "cripple him psychologically" (178).

The mythical characterization employed by Heyns can again be seen in Natasha's prophetic identification with the "the poor dead nymph" (105) in Piero di Cosimo's painting *A Satyr Mourning over a Nymph*. Natasha, however, is acutely aware that as a South African woman of colour, a child of "drought and poverty", she has forgotten how to see the "much, much older", "buried mythology" (106) of her own country. Natasha's awareness of her own lost history foregrounds questions of identity, belonging and cultural loss against the totalizing power of western media and globalization.

Following Natasha's return home and a calamitous dinner with his long-time girlfriend Jenny, Terence starts talking to Andy, a homeless man, and his dog, Robbie. Despite their "unangelic-looking" (132) exterior, both are characterized as angel-like. As an anonymous vagrant sitting outside a station, Andy becomes a scapegoat for people who have "got some shit in their lives they want to get even with" (133); in

the absence of telephone booths or public toilets he is assaulted and urinated on. One evening, after receiving devastating news, Terence sees Andy and Robbie and invites them for dinner, underscoring the need for connection which transcends propriety. Terence's invitation ignites an unusual friendship compelling him (literally by sitting down next to Andy on a piece of cardboard outside the busy Oxford Circus station) to see the world from a different angle. Observing others from this altered position emphasizes the recurrent theme of human connection and echoes Natasha's belief that becoming aware "of the millions who aren't you [...] somehow resets your categories" (emphasis in original, 87).

Heyns's novel demands to be reread, not only to allow the reader to participate more fully in the rich intertextuality of the text, but because of the philosophical density of *Each Mortal Thing* which, as a result of the ease with which the novel engages the reader, may be neglected. Although the novel has no momentous ending, apart perhaps from the precarious happy ending granted to Andy and Robbie, *Each Mortal Thing* shows how tragedies and small joys, which "in the larger scheme of things" (222) seem unimportant, are precisely what make life worth living. Each event can be traced backward and forward in an infinite chain of causality, linked by our relationships to the point at which we find ourselves existing with others in time and place. The novel's dedication "For my friends" is therefore apt in acknowledging our indebtedness to others for who we are and in highlighting the need for connection and for friendship.

**Xanya Liebenberg**  
**liebex@unisa.ac.za**  
**University of South Africa**  
**Pretoria, South Africa**  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2593-5783>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v6i1.17964>