

Mirage.

David Ralph Viviers.

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A novel in which the reader meets “*Boophone distica*” (13), a sentence from Einstein in German (partly glossed), (19), and a phrase in Classical Greek “*Bous phonos*” (transliterated but not translated), (29), within the first 30 pages presents clear challenges to the reader. Viviers invites his readers to share with his various characters (roughly separated by a century) in a process of gradual and never-quite-complete decoding. Because of this it is difficult to say what the book is ‘about’ without giving away information that would provide a series of spoiler alerts and defeat the author’s purpose. Two principal narratives (both fictitious) intertwine: the earlier is that of a late Victorian novelist, Elizabeth Tenant, trying to write a novel at the ‘railway village’ of Sterfontein in the Karoo in the late 1890’s, and of Michael Marais, focaliser of the novel’s ‘present’, working on a thesis on Tenant, who visits Sterfontein as part of his research activities. Both ‘past’ and ‘present’, however, in terms of the novel’s parameters, are relative terms, as one of the ideas which Viviers is pursuing in his self-styled “novel of ideas” (228) is Einstein’s assertion (referred to above) that “‘The distinction between past, present and future is nothing but a stubborn illusion’” (35).

The ideas are indeed wide-ranging, and invoke black holes and their collision, a detailed knowledge of the botany of the Karoo, and the potentially more familiar paleontology of the Karoo. They are linked in a fresh exploration of “the imaginative possibilities of the South African landscape, its skies and its flora”. Another theme (linked to the “melancholy” Viviers finds in the Karoo) is the human sense of loss, of absences, of bereavement, and of the difficulties of sustained relationships, and Viviers uses the term ‘black holes’ as a kind of metaphor for such losses.

The “Prologue” presents us with two women—Elizabeth Tenant in Sterfontein in 1899, and Erica (who will become Michael’s mother) in Somerset West in 1989—if you like, two different sets of space-time co-ordinates (and note the interchangeability

of the digits). Both possess a certain knowledge of both Astronomy and Botany, both are convinced that Sterfontein is an ideal place for viewing 'the heavens', and, partly because of this, a place where space-time co-ordinates might blur ('mirage?') or merge. Elizabeth, after a long struggle, names her central character Michael; Erica deliberately names her son to mark her respect for Tenant's novel. Erica drops out of university in her final year of astrophysics; Michael's father is a devoted botanist. And so the play of ideas is set in motion. It is important to note, however, as a measure of Viviers's achievement, that the characters are not mere pasteboard masks representing a particular set of beliefs or theory of the universe, which is a danger faced by any novel of ideas. They are fully realized characters in the sense enjoyed by readers of novels. One is also grateful that Viviers—for all his exploration of the boundaries of time and place and, indeed, of human personality and consciousness—has not adopted the stream-of-consciousness techniques of his twentieth-century predecessors such as Joyce and Faulkner.

Mirage is a courageous book: on one level it could be read as a hymn to the mysterious hold of the Karoo for the twenty-first century readers, and perhaps only fiction or poetry is an adequate medium for portraying the hold that landscape gains over anyone alive to its great spaces and silences. In both the novel and his "Notes" at the end, Viviers deliberately references Olive Schreiner, whose *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) first brought the region to the world's attention. Two worthy contenders in the twentieth century are Eve Palmer's *The Plains of Camdeboo* (1966) and Guy Butler's *Karoo Morning* (1977), though neither of these is fiction. Viviers reminds us that *Mirage* was Schreiner's original title for her *Story*. The references in Viviers's novel to details of Schreiner's life and thought are multiple and complex and perhaps best left to each reader to explore. It is hard to resist asking, though, whether the name of the owner's house at Sterfontein—"Millthorpe House"—is not a coded reference to Millthorpe (near Sheffield, UK) where Edward Carpenter, a friend and correspondent of Schreiner's, lived with his 'working-class' lover. Carpenter was an early advocate of feminism and of gay rights, and the recipient of some of Schreiner's ecstatic letters on the Karoo after she returned to South Africa in 1890 (and found how well Matjiesfontein suited her asthmatic lungs).

The Karoo both as social construct and geographical region evokes multiple meanings in all who make any kind of contact with it: Viviers is to be commended for evoking in *Mirage* a new constellation of meanings for new generations to explore.

Paul Stephen Walters

P.Walters@ru.ac.za

Rhodes University

Makhanda/Grahamstown, South Africa.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1886-8359>

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