

the constitution of selfhood and the production of memory. The narrator finds himself in a small mining town, unaware of his whereabouts, his history and his identity. He has rented a neglected house some distance from the town, and a large overgrown hedge separates his house from an identical one next door.

Characterisation in the novel is fractured and opaque, and the narration shifts between describing the protagonist in the singular, referring to him elsewhere as "Karl" (and "the Karl creature"), and even describing the protagonist and Karl as two distinct characters who are present simultaneously. As the novel progresses, readers realise that the protagonist has experienced several traumas that gradually come into view. Conventional characterisation is further questioned through the protagonist's sustained personification of the house (referred to as a "harlot") who functions repeatedly as a female interlocutor for his thoughts.

The novel is structured into three parts, titled "Karl", "Henri", and "Elgar", and focalisation shifts seamlessly between these characters and others. Whereas the first part of the novel introduces readers to Karl and the protagonist, the second part introduces us to Henri, a young boy who moves into the neighbouring house with his abusive, drug-dealing father and his abused, ineffectual mother. When Henri's father urgently needs money, he instructs his wife to prepare the outside room for their son (with a new bed and linen that should emphasise his youthfulness). It becomes clear not only that the father intends to charge people to have

A Gap in the Hedge.

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A Gap in the Hedge begins with a somewhat obscure declaration from the narrator: "I reckon it's very mean to cut a man out of the world and leave only his shadow. What if it gets lonely, misses itself? Because it does, you know?" (7). Johan Vlok Louw's third novel is a curiously sparse and compelling text that interrogates our understanding of narrative perspective and characterisation, and explores the impact of trauma on

sex with his young son, but that this has happened previously.

The title of the third part of the novel, "Elgar", refers to the police officer who investigates the later murder of Henri's mother by his father and who discovers Henri walking in the rain after Henri has presumably shot and killed his father.

Throughout the novel, however, the protagonist's and Henri's narratives overlap in several ways. Before Henri and his parents move in, the protagonist discovers children's toys in an outside room: "He bends down. A dusty old Tonka Toy lorry still in good condition. He knows of it, and of a boy of about nine, ten" (41). However, Henri's parents only take occupation of the neighbouring house after this discovery and only then does Henri move his new toy cars into the room. Similarly, whereas at one point the protagonist looks out and somewhat incoherently drops the phrase "an old, purple Citroen" (52) into his narration, Henri later tells the police that his father's killers drove a round purple car. The protagonist's feeling that an old lady in the town might be his mother is strikingly resonant with Henri's later concern for his then missing mother. Both the protagonist and Henri seem to have a habit of slowly saying certain words, spelling them out and savouring their sounds. When the novel recounts the protagonist's late-night description of the inner-workings of the neighbouring house, the protagonist observes that it is easy to avoid making a noise when "one must simply be lighter than air" (76), and readers are left uncertain about his

intimate knowledge of their home.

It is only at the end of the novel that the truth is revealed: Henri is not the neighbour's boy in the present, but rather the protagonist's memory of his childhood in the past. In the final chapter, the use of the pronoun "I" comes to mark out both the protagonist and Henri (and the Karl persona seems entirely absent). As he is about to burn down the site of his traumatic childhood, he observes: "In Dad's room, I see that someone has filled up the bullet hole. It's been painted over but you can make it out easily, if you know where to look" (233). The temporal juxtaposition has given way, and now the adult protagonist can make sense of the bullet hole from many years beforehand. The integration of both narrative time and characterisation is most clear when he concludes that after killing his father, "Henri comes out onto the driveway, and we walk towards ourselves" (233). The ontological tension between these two characters depends on subtle suggestion and carefully discarded fragments of memory. The astutely crafted narrative gives clues about the complex psychological interplay but does not undermine the reader's surprise at the final revelation. It is highly unfortunate, however, that the blurb on the back cover of the book, as well as the publisher's press release, anticipate this revelation about the characters when they state that "the real connection between Henri and Karl is revealed". This paratextual forewarning unnecessarily primes the reader for the conclusion and undoes much of the power of Louw's extraordinarily subtle and disciplined storytelling.

While both Jennifer de Klerk's (2017) and Brian Joss's (2017) reviews of the novel use the metaphor of the missing puzzle piece to think about the explanatory information provided in the final chapter, this overstates the overall coherence of the text. Things do not necessarily "fit" as easily as their metaphor suggests. Narrative time, the malleability of memory and the reconstitution of selfhood are not completely resolved in the novel: there are expressions, descriptions and moments that are not assimilable into linear notions of time or conventional understandings of character development. These do not appear to be signs of authorial carelessness but rather they work to produce a narrative jaggedness that resists any easy sense of closure.

Works Cited

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