

Asleep Awake Asleep.

Jo-Ann Bekker.

Cape Town: Modjaji Books, 2019. 146 pp.

ISBN 978 1 928215 78 3.

Asleep Awake Asleep is a collection of 39 stories divided into six sections. Although one could read the individual stories each on their own, there is the suggestion of a narrative thread underpinning the collection as if part of a novella focusing on the life span of a particular character. The central character's lifeline as a child, student, mother and writer is presented to us as the collection progresses. The choice of name, Rip (short for Ripple), not only calls to mind the mythical Rip van Winkle, but also a ripple effect on a surface, suggesting the making of small waves, which the author intends to do with her writing.

The stories deal with childhood experiences, her experiences as a journalist, marital life and the final story, "Embers" (in section 6) engages with aspects of the opening story, "Dolphins left a chocolate in the fridge" (in section 1). The title alludes to the experiences of the main character and ties in with some of the stories that read like recollected dream experiences. The different phases of life are also linked to a particular city and landscape, colouring the milieu and contributing to the meaning of the story.

The female subject in the respective stories reflects on her life in the turbulent years before the release of Mandela and often intersperses her experiences with a historical or political event. As a liberal journalist, she is an outsider in her community and is seen as a

traitor (72) by her husband's colleagues. In this regard, the final paragraph of "Peripheral" (65) is an example of self-undermining introspection: "She changes quotes so the voteless speak Standard English, because she cannot interview people in their mother tongues. She doesn't see she is ignoring the way English is changing, that she is casually eclipsing voices herself."

Hers is a world peopled by security police, lascivious men who grope young women, men in khaki who love wild animals and a younger son who is into meditation, forming part of a group of dolphins. Bekker joins a long gallery of authors in her depiction of the colonel of the security police and other sympathizers of the apartheid state apparatus. Her unwillingness to collaborate results in the stabbing of her car tyres and receiving a note telling her that as a "commie bastard" she is going to die (47).

Although I have appreciation for Bekker's collection, I want to point out two issues: The one is the almost formulaic way in which the stories open and the second is the use of a type of staccato reportage, similar to journalese. Examples of the formulaic are the opening lines of a few stories: "Just before she sailed home on a mail ship, a woman met a younger man" (10); "Belinda was different after Mr Marais kissed me in the art room" (18), "A British oboe player came to the City of Roses" (22). The formula gives us a clear indication of the main plot of the story.

Not all Bekker's tales are formulaic but eventually it becomes predictable. This contrasts with her use of understatement and condensed way of telling a story. The journalistic style almost reads like a series of instructions: she did this, then this, then went there, then that. Perhaps Sarah Blackman's assessment on the last page of the text explains this better: "In fairy tales and elegies, flash-bulb bright vignettes and elegant absurdities, *Asleep Awake Asleep* imagines the world as a response to the dream of self." As a reader, I am more drawn to well-planned short stories than to "flash-bulb bright vignettes".

What I find inventive in Bekker's collection, is the way in which she intertwines historical and fictional material; the juxtaposition of Mandela's victory walk with the birth of her child and the final confrontation with the Cradock Four in a gallery dedicated to them: "A humble shed in the museum's yard. The curator unlocked the door. Large full-body photographs of the men walked towards her from four pillars... In the photograph Matthew, Fort and two comrades are walking towards the camera, towards Rip" (132).

The character of Ripple was apparently present when the photograph was taken, and she is like a latter-

day Rip van Winkle in a postcolonial environment. Equally inventive is "The Good Housekeeping Magazine Quiz" (118) presenting the plot in a series of multiple-choice questions.

I concur with Bridget Hilton-Barber, quoted in the blurb on the book's back cover, that Bekker's writing is "lyrical, tactile and sensual." I hope she develops one of the stories into a longer novel.

Marius Crous

Marius.Crous@mandela.ac.za

Nelson Mandela University

Port Elizabeth, South Africa

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0753-7700>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v57i2.8552>