

**Swing Time** ★★★★★  
Zadie Smith (Hamish Hamilton, R305)

It was the first day of my humiliation." These are the opening lines to Zadie Smith's exuberant new novel, *Swing Time*. The story starts just as it's about to end, with exile and a scandal. In present-day London, the unnamed narrator finds herself in a hotel room with the curtains drawn and her phone switched off — shamed, shunned and shut off from the world.

Like the Sankofa bird with its neck eternally bent backwards, a recurring motif in the novel, the narrator looks to the beginning of her life, which she marks not as her birth but the day she met her best friend Tracey. The first thing she

**It's also about race, class, sexuality, and identity**

notes is the difference between their mothers — the narrator's mother is a determined yet aloof autodidact from Jamaica; Tracey's white mother's only ambition is to "get on the disability". Despite their differences — the narrator's family is slightly better off than Tracey's, yet the latter is the one with all the expensive toys — the two girls become closer than sisters. Their friendship is cemented in their shared passion for dance. The first part of the novel is a beautiful coming-of-age story of two very different girls who continue to have a lasting effect on each other's lives into adulthood, even from a distance.

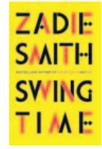
The adult narrator is, not unlike her mother, not a very likeable character. Neither is Tracey. Both girls grow up and away from each other, into



## Tango and tears

'Swing Time' is a dramatic dance, writes Annetjie van Wynegaard

roles they didn't so much choose as submit to. Tracey, the ambitious one, makes it into dance school, while the more academically minded narrator sabotages her own chances of getting into a good school as an act of rebellion against her mother. Still driven by her love for music and dance, she



becomes a personal assistant to a superstar celebrity named Aimee. Her relationship with Aimee echoes the passive-aggressive patterns of her friendship with Tracey. Aimee is happy to have her around, as long as she's at her beck and call and knows who the real star is. When

**SURE FOOTED:** English author Zadie Smith

Aimee decides to build a school in a rural West African village, the narrator starts to see her for who she really is — someone who takes and exploits and dominates. From here the story unravels fast, until the two ends meet once again.

*Swing Time* is a story about relationships — between two mixed-race girls, between mothers and daughters, between fathers and daughters, between friends and co-workers — and the power relations within these relationships and how they shift over time.

It's also about race, class, sexuality, and identity. Early on in the novel little Tracey informs the unnamed narrator that having a white father is different from having a white mother.

"It turned out Tracey was as curious about my family as I was about hers, arguing, with a certain authority, that we had things 'the wrong way round'. I listened to her theory one day during break, dipping a biscuit anxiously into my orange squash. 'With everyone else it's the dad,' she said, and because I knew this to be more or less accurate I could think of nothing more to say. 'When your dad's white it means —' she continued, but at that moment Lily Bingham came and stood next to us and I never did learn what it meant when your dad was white."

In a recent essay in *The Guardian*, Smith writes: "I feel dance has something to tell me about what I do." The inspiration of dance is evident between the pages of *Swing Time*. The novel moves effortlessly between the different timelines, pulsing and vibrating with its own rhythmic energy, flawless in its execution, demanding that you hold your breath until the very last beat. @annetjievw

**The God Who Made Mistakes** ★★★★★  
Ekow Duker (Picador Africa, R260)

DON'T know how I feel about it. That was my initial thought after reading Ekow Duker's *The God Who Made Mistakes*, a novel about a black man living what might be the South African dream (corporate job, German car, house in the suburbs, pretty wife), but stands to lose it all because of a secret that's threatening to disturb the performed perfection of his life. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out what Themba's life-altering secret is, but Duker writes about it with such delicateness and simultaneously in such a raw manner that its reveal doesn't feel cheap or fake.

Ayanda, the pretty wife, feels trapped in a marriage with a husband like Themba who doesn't love her and doesn't even pretend to. Unappreciated at home and at work, she takes to dancing as a refuge from her otherwise unpleasant life.

Themba is his mother's favourite son: he's an attorney, has his own home in the sub-

urbs, he's married (although it's to a woman she detests). He made it out of the streets of Alex, to the pride of his mother and the dismay of his older brother, Bongani. Bongani's resentment for Themba is amplified by the thought that Themba might be the one who inherits their mother's house when she dies, even though Bongani is the one who has never moved out of home.

Duker is not an emotional writer. So if you're looking to clutch your chest in despair over a lethal combination of adjectives and adverbs, please read something else or turn on a sappy Lifetime channel movie.

*The God Who Made Mistakes* is intense. It's interesting that the author can deliver a book this potent while using simple, to-the-point language. Duker has



## Unvarnished lives of our local deplorables

no time to explain the intricacies and complexities of human beings: he just rips off the skin to show us the bare bones of the worst in people.

There is no "good guy" in this book. The closest to a decent person we get is Ayanda. His mother is an overbearing, controlling woman

(the proverbial mother-in-law from hell) and his brother is a loser who blames everyone but himself for the way his life has turned out.

This is not to say Themba is a saint; far from it. He's quite unlikeable — a mentally weak man who thinks the only way to prove his masculinity is by treating his wife terribly. But once Themba admits his secret to himself and eventually those around him, it humanises him, softens him.

For all its intensity, *The God*

*Who Made Mistakes* is surprisingly witty and sharp, with acerbic asides like this one on the current state of menswear: "All the men wore blue suits these days, even the president. They thought it expressed their individuality when in fact it did the opposite."

(He also writes great analogies and figures of speech.) The book makes for great — and at times difficult — reading. One of its strengths is that Duker presents his characters, their lives, their thoughts, emotions and actions (and sometimes the disconnect between the last two) to the reader and leaves them there. It's not Duker's job to tell you how to feel; he's not pushing the reader's thoughts in any particular direction.

That doesn't mean it feels as though he does not care about the subject matter and topics raised: quite the opposite.

No one could write so fiercely about something unless they cared about it deeply. But refraining from forcing your views down the reader's throat is a skill to be admired, and *The God Who Made Mistakes* does this so well. — Pearl Boshomane @Pearlloysias

## book bites

**Book Mystery**  
**The Perplexing Theft of the Jewel in the Crown** ★★★★★  
Vaseem Khan (Hodder & Stoughton, R350)  
Readers will rejoice at this reunion with venerable Inspector Chopra, his wife Poppy and chocolate-guzzling elephant Ganesha! Chopra visits a heavily guarded exhibition on the very day when the priceless Koh-i-Noor diamond is stolen. He leads us on a helter-skelter hunt for the gem, now part of the British crown jewels, but historically a source of legendary covetousness. Unsavoury characters from Mumbai's dark underbelly join in the chase, as do more endearing ones. Laced with raucous humour, pathos and occasionally disturbing realism, this caper has serious undertones in its examinations of Indian politics, corruption and post-Raj Anglo-Indian diplomacy. — Ayesha Kajej @ayeshakajej

**Book Buff**  
**The Comet Seekers** ★★★★★  
Helen Sedgwick (Harvill Secker, R285)  
*The Comet Seekers* is an epic ballad. The lyrical story follows the comets visible from Earth over a 1000-year span. At its core are two lives, destined to meet in Antarctica: Róisín, a scientist who studies the sky, and François, a chef whose ancestors are linked to the scenes on the Bayeux Tapestry. The story gently weaves in and out of generations, littered with ghosts, depicting lives that are stuck and people who cannot stop wandering. A tale of magical realism that encourages dreaming, with a caveat to not dismiss the ground beneath our feet. — Tiah Beauteum @ms\_tiahmarie

**Book Buff**  
**The Nix** ★★★★★  
Nathan Hill (Picador, R305)  
In the opening scene of *The Nix*, an elderly woman throws stones at a right-wing politician, causing a media frenzy that brandishes her as a terrorist. It's a scenario that plants this novel firmly in the here and now, and captures the rift between left and right in the US. Would-be novelist/college professor Samuel Andresen-Anderson sees this and it's not how he pictured being reunited with his estranged mother. Samuel is forced to make a difficult choice — continue hiding in his office, or write a tell-all book portraying his mother as a monster. It's brilliantly executed political satire, anchored by the powerful drama unfolding between mother and son. The hefty 600-plus page novel is well worth taking your time absorbing. If John Irving compared *The Nix* to Dickens, you know it's a classic in the making. — Sally Partridge @sappartridge

**Book Fling**  
**The Hummingbird's Cage** ★★★★★  
Tamara Dietrich (Orion, R184)  
This debut novel is a believable exercise in magic realism, a gentle observation of a woman conditioned to accept anything, until she realises she needs to escape. Joanna is violently abused by her husband Jim, a popular and protected cop in a small town. She has given up, but is rescued by Jim's ex, a wild biker, and ends up in the idyllic and unmapped village of Morro. The only problem is that all the good folk of Morro are dead. Joanna can remain in limbo, but knows she should go back and confront her demons. — Aubrey Paton



**Jacket Notes**  
PAMELA POWER

I STARTED writing *Things Unseen* in 2010 during the Soccer World Cup, when I was in a dark place in my life. My mother-in-law had died of cancer in December 2008, my mom was diagnosed with cancer in 2009 and died a year later. Six weeks after my mother died, my nephew contracted cerebral malaria. He spent nine days in a coma with multi-organ failure and recovered, but only after having nine of his toes amputated.

I remember sitting in the carpark of Milpark Hospital and weeping uncontrollably about his toes. It was stressful and there wasn't time to mourn my mother properly. So I did what I always do in times of crisis, I wrote about it. About how losing your mother — no matter how difficult your relationship was — is always profound.

After everything we had been through, I didn't feel like writing something light. But I had a panic attack because my first novel, *Ms Conception*, published in 2012, was such a different genre — light, racy, funny and about suburban life. I kept dilly-dallying over whether I should be writing something in the same style. I



**My husband loved it (probably because I had stopped writing about our lives)**

whined about it to anyone who would listen until my bossy eldest brother said, "For Pete's sake, just write both novels!" So I did. I started writing another novel in 2013 which was grip lit (what author Marian Keyes calls thrillers so engrossing that you can't put them down) and I wrote the psychological thriller *Things Unseen*.

Just as well, as my publisher, Penguin Random House SA, did not like *Things Unseen*, which was devastating at the time. Luckily, my husband loved it (probably because he was ecstatic I had stopped writing about our lives) and my independent publisher, Sarah McGregor, loved it as well. Well, obviously not that much, as she made me rewrite about 50% of it.

It was such a labour of love — I had doctor and lawyer friends reading it, Karina Brink gave me notes and a wonderful shout for the front cover, and my husband did a final proof read (my knowledge of golf clubs is sadly lacking). The book's also been getting great reviews, which came as a complete surprise. I always think everything I write is rubbish and I'm amazed that people might want to read it.

In terms of what's next for me, the grip lit is called *Delilah Now Trending* and will be published by Penguin Random House SA in April 2017.

● *Things Unseen* is published by Clockwork Books (R220). It's available at Love Books in Joburg, The Book Lounge in Cape Town and at Exclusive Books.

**LINK LOVE:**  
NYT's listicle of best reads  
The NY Times list of 100 best books of 2016. <http://bit.ly/100NYtimes>

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**How pornography brought down the last pillar of apartheid**

*Into The Laager: Afrikaners Living on the Edge* by Kajsa Norman is an examination of Afrikaner culture, from the Battle of Blood River to Orania. Jonathan Ball Publishers has shared an excerpt in which Norman visits Joe Theron, the former music producer who introduced Hustler to South Africa and later founded its Afrikaans sister

publication, Loslyf. "In the early 1990s, music producer Joe Theron decided to enter the sex entertainment industry. He wanted to start publishing Hustler in South Africa, so he flew to Los Angeles in an effort to obtain the rights. After trying unsuccessfully for three weeks to get an audience with American porn king Larry Flynt, he decided to get more creative. He went to the offices of Hustler and rode the elevator up and down until Flynt finally entered the elevator in his wheelchair. After Theron delivered what was quite literally an elevator pitch, Flynt invited him into his office." ● Read the full excerpt at [www.bookslive.co.za](http://www.bookslive.co.za)

**GIVEAWAY**  
We are giving away three copies of *The God Who Made Mistakes* by Ekow Duker. To enter, answer this question: What is the name of Themba's wife in the novel? E-mail your answer, name and contact details to [lifestyle@sundaytimes.co.za](mailto:lifestyle@sundaytimes.co.za). Only ONE entry per person. Competition closes on Friday December 9. Ts and Cs apply.

# CHRISTMAS HIGHLIGHTS

## FROM JONATHAN BALL PUBLISHERS

**CLIFFHANGER**  
GARETH CLIFF

Confessions of a Shock Jock

From campus radio DJ to host of South Africa's biggest youth breakfast show to pioneering his own online hub, Gareth Cliff has always claimed the headlines with his brand of strong opinion and whiplash wit. In *Cliffhanger*, South Africa's controversial shock jock goes behind the scenes to give you a brutally honest first-hand account of the highs and lows of the past two decades.

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