

What We Lose
★★★★
Zinzi Clemmons
Fourth Estate,
R240

FRAUGHT RELATIONS

Zinzi Clemmons wonders how you ever heal from losing the person who healed you. By **Tiah Beaument**

This is a debut work of great beauty and depth, a poignant fictional memoir that began as a series of journal entries Clemmons wrote while caring for her mother. Like the main character Thandi, Clemmons is an American-South African who loses her mother to cancer.

It was this experience that brought home to Clemmons the disparities in US healthcare. She explains: "Oppression in the US tends to operate under the surface, usually through policies that ensure that minorities, and blacks especially, do not have access to the same opportunities as whites... by the time a black person is diagnosed, their conditions are more advanced, and they aren't able to access proper treatment."

Clemmons's story masterfully illustrates grieving. It is raw and brutal, devoid of platitudes. Thandi reflects, "I realised that this would be life; to figure out how to live without her hand on my back; her soft, accented English telling me Everything will be all right, Thandi. This was the paradox: How would I ever heal from losing the person who healed me? The question was so enormous that I could see only my entire life, everything I know, filling it."

The writing style of *What We Lose* – a series of vignettes, peppered with charts and e-mails – contributes to the portrait of grief. "My only thought during the entire [writing] process was to tell the story in the way that felt right to me, and it was only later in the process that I realised that this style mirrored the way that grief fragments memory and thought," Clemmons says.

What We Lose has been described as a



BOLD Clemmons deals with the complexity of mother-daughter relationships. Picture: Nina Stubin

coming-of-age story. Clemmons believes this to be a fair description as "losing parents is an event that forces us to grow up, that accelerates adulthood". But the story's greatest strength is in its unromanticised depictions of motherhood and its complex portrayal of a mother-daughter relationship.

"I think [my mother and I] both compounded that conflict when we saw ourselves not living up to some idealised version of how our relationship should be... These expectations we as women place on ourselves – in many aspects of our lives – ultimately cause nothing but harm."

Thandi's story, however, is not Clemmons's. Thandi's grief-stricken journey contains her own mistakes. She is an intelligent and sympathetic character, honest and open about her sexual needs. "It was absolutely a conscious decision to present Thandi as a sexually powerful person,"

Clemmons says. "I think that authenticity – that unwillingness to bend to the male gaze – is unfortunately rare, but it's necessary."

The story is set in both the US and South Africa. Thandi, raised in a well-to-do US suburb, is hypersensitive to the contrast between her home and Johannesburg. This American lens means that Thandi's observations on Oscar Pistorius, for example, will undoubtedly be controversial for some South African readers. By contrast, many South Africans will empathise with Thandi's observations on identity and race, because she is not only stretched between two countries and cultures, but her very skin leaves her dislocated from her peers – either too light or too dark. As Thandi says: "I've often thought that being a light-skinned black woman is like being a well-dressed person who is also homeless."

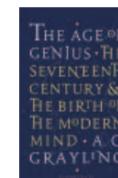
'That unwillingness to bend to the male gaze is unfortunately rare'

@ms_tiahmarie

Book Bites

BOOK BUFF

The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind ★★★★★
AC Grayling, Bloomsbury, R350



The book of the year for history buffs and closet philosophers. The question at the centre is: how did the events of the 17th century radically alter the way people thought about the world and their place in it? Grayling offers a detailed yet riveting account of the history of ideas; how ideologies transformed despite – or because of – the tumultuous events of the 1600s. The 17th century is known for its battles between Catholics and Protestants, and Catholicism and science. But it was also a triumphant time that gave rise to, among many other things, the postal service. 📖

Anna Stroud @annawriter_

BOOK REAL

A Fast Ride out of Here: Confessions Of Rock's Most Dangerous Man ★★★
Pete Way, Constable, R315



Pete Way is a colourful character who played bass for '70s rockers UFO and a number of other bands. In his day he was capable of – as detailed throughout this book's 250 or so pages – ingesting enough drugs and alcohol to make even Keith Richards arch a concerned eyebrow.

It's a direct, old-fashioned sex and drugs and rock 'n roll tell-all. It entertains and frustrates in equal measure – Way's lackadaisical "that's just how I was" attitude to his excesses and the pain he caused often comes across as selfishness rather than as a request for the leeway sometimes required by an artistic nature. 📖 Bruce Dennill @BroosDennill

DARK MIRRORS

Readers are lapping up stories about the bleak times ahead. By **Jennifer Platt**

Dystopian fiction has knocked the glistening vampire off the young adult shelf. It is hardly a new genre – think *Lord of the Flies, 1984* – but there has been a steady uptake of the genre for young adult readers. Maybe it is because these novels are mirrors of our world, which is a terrifying place.

Dystopian fiction recognises the crisis we are in today and through an alternative prism allows the reader to play out worst-case scenarios. The protagonist is often a young person trying to overcome odds like love triangles and fighting the controlled social structure of the new broken world.

It gives the younger reader a chance to relate; a way to view society and

possibly solve problems.

But it's not only younger readers who are immersing themselves in these bleak realms. Many people enjoy a good yarn and most of the stories are just that. These lesser-known novels will appeal to dystopian fans.

Asylum, Marcus Low

Set in the Great Karoo, Low's story plays out in a not-too-distant future in which a lethal, incurable illness kills off most of the population. Barry James is one of the sick – imprisoned and quarantined in an asylum where he is expected to die.

The Power, Naomi Alderman

The Baileys Prize-winning novel imagines a world where women have the ability to electrocute men at will. It's a work of contemporary feminism that confronts today's patriarchal system.



Station Eleven, Emily St John Mandel

A travelling theatre troupe, a deadly strain of swine flu and destructive relationships are the basis for this award-winning novel set in the Great Lakes region of the US and Canada.



Apocalypse Now Now, Charlie Human

Baxter's life as the 16-year-old drug kingpin of his school changes when his girlfriend Esme is kidnapped. To save her, he goes into the dark, supernatural underground of Cape Town. Trippy.



Who Fears Death, Nnedi Okorafor

Okorafor tweeted that her novel has been optioned by HBO to develop as a TV series with *Game of Thrones* author George RR Martin as executive producer. Dealing with race, ethnicity and female sexual empowerment, it focuses on 16-year-old Onyesonwu who must learn to navigate life in post-apocalyptic Sudan.

The Raft, Fred Strydom

Humanity has lost its memory. Civilisation collapses. Kayle Jenner has vague visions of his son and as he sets out to find him, he discovers the truth about the world's memory loss. Set partly in the Tsitsikamma forest and Kroonstad, *The Raft* explores existential and philosophical questions.

The Knife of Never Letting Go, Patrick Ness

The first of a series called Chaos Walking. Todd is the last boy in Prentisstown, where everyone can hear each other's thoughts through something called the Noise. About information overload, it's relevant as we are swamped by the noise of social media.

Dark Windows, Louis Greenberg

The Gaia Peace Party has been in power in South Africa for 10 years, promising a cure for crime. A contractor for the party is given the job of blackening the windows of several Joburg buildings. The dark windows project shows the cracks in the ruling party. A too-close-to-home political thriller. 📖