



The Inside-Out Man
★★★★★
Fred Strydom, Umuzi,
R230

TWISTS AND SHOUTS

Fred Strydom's new novel explores identity through characters who are striving to find peace. By **Anna Stroud**

Fred Strydom was a kid who always asked, "Why?" He started writing as soon as he could read, and in high school he wrote *Pulp Fiction*-style plays with his friend Sean Wilson that smashed the tedium of traditional school productions. It's only natural then that his inquisitive mind and subversive streak should culminate in a book like *The Inside-Out Man*.

"Both *The Raft* and *The Inside-Out Man* are books about identity," Strydom said about his debut and second novel. "[They're] books about people being scared of who they are."

The narrator is jazz genius Bently Croud – aka Bent, "the misshapen state" – who meets billionaire Leonard Fry. Leonard presents him with an unusual proposal: live in my house for a year while I lock myself in a room, and let's see what happens.

Strydom's characters are unnervingly honest. "Always write from the perspective of the person you trust the most," he said. He spent the most time with Bent, but there's also a part of him – a part that scares him – that identifies with Leonard. "Leonard does represent a twisted, idealistic version of how I wish I could sometimes be... to act on impulse, to say 'to hell with it', to make rash decisions, to be totally confident and to let the chips fall where they may."

The setting is Krymeer, a countryside mansion – a three-dimensional character with a locked door at the centre of the narrative.

"Something can only be constricting if it's alive," Strydom said. Bent is trapped by the city, the countryside, and the deal he made with Leonard. "Each trap is presented to him as an option out... but it isn't."

Bent struggles to cope with the residues of an unhappy childhood – an absent father and an unhappy, alcoholic mother – and his own lack of self-awareness. The one thing he wants, Strydom said, is peace. "I think we're more aware of how Bent's past affects him than he's aware of it." Leonard, on the other



Picture: © Joanne Olivier

hand, "represents somebody who's trying to find peace with himself by keeping himself from a world that he can't fit in with."

The tension in *The Inside-Out Man* is maintained by the three characters in the house – Bent, Leonard, and Jolene (Bent's girlfriend) – and their secrets. Strydom drew

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on influences like Edgar Allan Poe, the irrational horror of HP Lovecraft, Alfred Hitchcock's film noir, and Raymond Chandler's gritty dialogue. "There's a femme fatale you can't trust, there's an anti-hero and there's a mystery at the heart of it."

There are strange parallels between Bent

and his mother and Jolene and her son. He gets sucked into her world, and soon he can no longer recognise himself in the mirror.

Strydom writes his stories in his head, and finds the act of putting words to paper the "least interesting" part of writing. He wrote a third of *The Raft* during a road trip from Cape Town to Johannesburg. "If it's good it will stick and if it's not good it will go," he said. "It's just a case of getting a hold of your story."

Strydom wants his work to inspire people to pursue their own talents. "We should have the courage to be pure storytellers," he said. "I don't mind if my book isn't the best book of the year, but it's really great if it invites people to take a stab at it."

If one book can inspire others, it's *The Inside-Out Man*. Multilayered, honest and, as promised, a hell of a trip. Don't try to label it, but if you must, forget about it being speculative fiction. That raft has sailed. 📖

@annawriter_

WILDERNESS GUIDE

Black Moses ★★★★★
Alain Mabanckou, Serpent's Tail, R300

The cliché that comes to mind after reading Alain Mabanckou's *Black Moses* is "better late than never", because I had previously never heard of him or his works. And I'm glad that I'm tardy to the party rather than never having cracked an invite at all. The novel, which made the Man Booker longlist, is a delicious read – even if its premise is a tragic one.

The *Black Moses* of the title is a boy who was named by a priest, Papa Moupelo, when he was a child in an

oppressive orphanage. His full name is actually a sentence: Tokumisa Nzambe po Mose yamoyindo abotami namboka ya Bakoko, or "Thanks be to God, the black Moses is born on the earth of our ancestors." While this name might seem almost ridiculous, Moses tries to live up to its meaning – as someone who will lead the lost out of the proverbial desert.

But after Papa Moupelo is plucked from his life and a Marxist-Leninist revolution erupts in 1970s Democratic Republic of Congo, Moses joins a street gang and reinvents himself as Little Pepper, before eventually appointing himself Robin Hood.

Black Moses shows a character at various stages of their life in what feels like a series of screen grabs. That's not

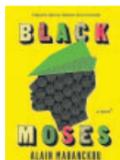


a criticism – it's one of the things I love about it.

Mabanckou is a delightful writer whose long sentences (much like Moses' name) are pretty rather than pretentious. Even when he writes about Moses' descent into madness, it's hard not to find pleasure in its description, as tragic as the subject matter is.

Example: "My memory problems affected my gait and I started to walk in zigzags because it completely slipped my mind that the shortest route from one point to another is a straight line, which is why, as they say around here, drunkards always come home late."

If writing really is like dancing as Zadie Smith said, then *Black Moses* is a literary tap dance. 📖 Pearl Boshomane @pearloysias



Book Bites

BOOK THRILL

Kill the Father ★★★★★
Sandrone Dazieri
Simon & Schuster, R270



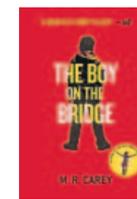
Dante Torre always thought his life could be divided into before and after. During his 11 years as the abused hostage of a faceless man known only as the Father, every day was caged.

After his escape, he seeks to help others and live as normal a life as possible. However, when detective Deputy Captain Colomba Caselli knocks on his door and asks for his help in a case involving the abduction of a child, Dante realises that perhaps there was no "after". Italian crime writer Sandrone Dazieri is a master of the macabre, weaving a satisfying adventure and creating a sense of lingering paranoia. 📖

Samantha Gibb @samantha_gibb

BOOK FIEND

The Boy on the Bridge ★★★★★
M.R. Carey, Little, Brown, R295



This is sort of a sidelong prequel to *The Girl With All the Gifts*. Not a sequel. But read *Girl* first and don't panic when none of the characters is familiar. They become so quickly.

Once again Carey writes with a light touch when it comes to the gore and the zombie/"hungries". Once again there is a humane feeling of empathy with the lead character – this time an autistic boy, Stephen Greaves, who is supposed to save the world with the help of a bunch of scientists. Once again, Carey writes something that will become an important part of apocalyptic references. 📖

Jennifer Platt @Jenniferdplatt

BOOK FLING

The Fire Child ★★★★★
SK Tremayne, HarperCollins, R160



SK Tremayne follows in the grand tradition of the Gothic romance in which an isolated woman, an iffy love interest, and the welfare of a child make for compelling reading. In a whirlwind

romance, Rachel from the "sarf of London" marries rich, handsome widower David and moves to his historic family mansion in Cornwall, where she lives with her delightful stepson Jamie. David is home only for weekends though, and Jamie changes, becoming remote and claiming his late mother Nina is going to return. Is Jamie hallucinating? Eerie, scary and compulsive reading. 📖 Aubrey Paton