

The Vegetarian ★★★★★
Han Kang, translated by Deborah Smith (Hogarth, R215)

SOUTH Korean author Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* is about what women put up with for the sake of being perceived as normal. It's about crossing boundaries — both mental and physical — and severing the familial ties that bind you to society.

The novel starts when Yeong-hye — up until this point a docile, unremarkable wife, according to her husband — decides to become vegetarian.

The first vignette is told through the eyes of her husband who finds her in the kitchen late one night, discarding all the meat products she can find. When he brusquely asks her what on earth she's doing, Yeong-hye gives a simple yet startling reply — "I had a dream."

Kang cleverly sketches the different sides of Yeong-hye's gradual decline through the eyes of her brute of a husband, her lewd brother-in-law, and her sister, the epitome of the submissive wife and mother.

The reader catches brief glimpses of Yeong-hye's thoughts and feelings through her disturbing dreams, but this insight dissolves as she locks herself inside her body, away from the world. The first part culminates in a family lunch that takes a violent turn when Yeong-hye's family try to force-



Pound of flesh

This South Korean novel addresses the plight of women everywhere, writes **Annetjie van Wynegaard**

feed her morsels of meat.

The second part of the novel takes place two years after the events of the first and is told from the perspective of the

brother-in-law. He becomes

obsessed with Yeong-hye's birthmark and what follows is his feverish obsession to make her body the canvas for his

erotic fantasies.

In the final chapter — through the eyes of perhaps the person closest to Yeong-hye, her sister In-hye — we see the total disintegration of Yeong-hye's body and mind. As she watches her sister waste away, In-hye remembers a moment when she too attempted to escape. She realised how easy it is to lose yourself: "Perhaps, at some point, Yeong-hye had simply left the slender thread that had kept her connected with everyday life."

Deborah Smith's translation captures the poetic simplicity of this short novel, which was published in 2007 and recently received the 2016 Man Booker International Prize.

The Vegetarian is foremost a story of abuse, rebellion and taboo. A simple act of swearing off meat causes Yeong-hye's family to react violently; each person in turn asserting their right to control her body. No one knows how to handle her "disobedience"; going against the wishes of your husband and father is not something that you do in Korean culture. Yet, it's her "otherness" that inspires her brother-in-law to pursue his innermost desires.

It's quite fitting then, that Yeong-hye never speaks for herself in the novel but rather speaks through the metamorphosis of her body, from docile to defiant, a site of struggle and protest. *The Vegetarian* shook the ground I walked on. It was a necessary awakening. — @Annetjieww

Tjieng Tjang Tjerries ★★★★★
Jolyn Phillips (Modjaji Books, R160)

JOLYN Phillips's spine must be sore. If her debut collection *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries and Other Stories* is even a quarter true, there is a lot resting on her shoulders. She has taken on the task of recording the language, loves and losses of the people of the depressed fishing town of Gansbaai — not unlike her character Mollie in "The Fire", who has assigned herself the role of soul guide to the newly dead.

Gansbaai being the perverse place it is, not all the deceased are ready to move on, and this works as a metaphor for the state of the country, too. Some shades prefer to hole up in a half-built house, smoking dagga: "Sakie and Delie cannot be taken over because when Mollie tried to take them to Holy Ghost they were too drunk and Holy Ghost banished them."

The spirits are unrepentant. "There is folkol of starting over man. Forget about it. We are already dead."

But Phillips does make a case for starting over, with a lustiness and tenacity that energises her writing. Phillips makes no apologies for the way that geography and industry throw people together and keep them rubbing along, each thinking that her story is a secret from her neighbour. In this collection there is neither the false romance of poverty nor pity for its depredations, which — hallelujah! — puts *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries* more in a class with Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* than Rive's *Buckingham Palace, District Six*. She fathoms the old story of



NEW AND LOVELY: It's not just shark cage diving at Gansbaai

Picture: RUVAN BOSHOFF

Goosebump coast

Jolyn Phillips captures the spirit of 'Cannery Row' in her stories about a local fishing dorp, writes **Diane Awerbuck**

addiction and apathy, but goes beyond that. The themes centre on responsibility and fidelity, mostly for the female characters, who bear the brunt of social inequality. Every character is at some crossroads or some revelation: what they do after their discoveries is what matters.

Phillips's compassion for her characters shines through the sea mist. Even the pieces that are sketches rather than fully developed stories are exasperated but affectionate: consider "Lelik", a story ostensibly about a dog that turns out to be about a man. He's

drunk so much that he has "forgotten how to be human". Phillips's dialogue feels real but will annoy purists. She trots out cheerfully brutal idioms: (child)birth is "in like 'n piesang; out like 'n pynappel!" but also writes with a clear lyricism that

seems to be plain speaking but is actually a careful weaving of tone and place. It slips a couple of times into caricature. Her writing otherwise soars and swoops, from the barely contained hysteria of the soap opera "Secrets" to the quiet, desperate strength of "The Fisherman", when a girl tries to take over her father's place on the boats.

Look out for *Tjieng Tjang Tjerries and Other Stories*, with its fantastic, ambiguous cover, its peculiarly dire proofreading, and its sense that something new and lovely is being made.



book bites

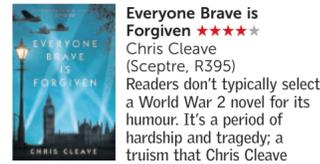
Book Real



Switched at Birth ★★★★★
Jessica Pitchford (Jonathan Ball, R220)
Imagine discovering your two-year-old isn't yours; that he'd been swapped at birth. It happened to Megs Clinton-Parker and Sandy Dawkins. Journalist Jessica Pitchford

tells their stories with all their ramifications of class anxieties, bitterness, resentment and anger. Everyone had an opinion, but there were no quick fixes. The boys were born in 1989, so now they are adults who, like their mothers and extended families, bear the scars. The best outcome could only be a fragile acceptance of what happened. It makes for a gripping, moving tale that will leave you horrified at the effect of a moment's carelessness by an unidentified nurse. —Margaret van Klemperer

Book Buff



Everyone Brave is Forgiven ★★★★★
Chris Cleave (Sceptre, R395)
Readers don't typically select a World War 2 novel for its humour. It's a period of hardship and tragedy; a truism that Chris Cleave does not flinch from.

Characters die, lives are irrevocably altered and Cleave shines a glaring spotlight on British racism and classism. But war in the everyday is clumsy and sometimes ridiculous. Cleave's characters, inspired by his grandparents, draw upon their dry British wit to carry on. This humour gives the book a special realism. Thus, a reader can comprehend how Mary North, a finishing-school drop-out, could become an ambulance driver. How Alistair, who once restored paintings at the Tate, could pick up a gun. — Tiah Beauteament @ms_tiahmarie

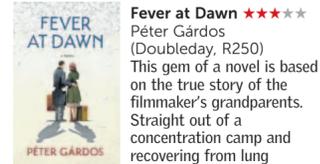
Book Heart



False Hearts ★★★★★
Laura Lam (Pan Macmillan, R310)
Set in a futuristic San Francisco, where crime has essentially been eradicated, this smart sci-fi thriller opens with conjoined twins Taema and Tila waking up from the operation that

separates them. We don't know much about them save they've never known a second apart and have recently escaped a strange cult called Mana's Hearth. We jump ahead to discover the twins have learnt to live apart, until one day Tila arrives on Taema's doorstep covered in blood. To save Tila's life, Taema must take on her sister's identity and delve into the underground world of Zeal, a drug that allows the user to act out their violent fantasies. — SA Partridge @sapartridge

Book Buff



Fever at Dawn ★★★★★
Péter Gárdos (Doubleday, R250)
This gem of a novel is based on the true story of the filmmaker's grandparents. Straight out of a concentration camp and recovering from lung disease, Hungarian refugee

Miklós plans his greatest coup — finding a wife. He writes letters to 177 women who might have lived in his hometown. Lili Reich is one of the women who answer his letter. From the first word, Miklós is captured by Lili. This starts a chain of correspondence that fosters their love and gives voice to their innermost desires. Written with sensitivity, *Fever at Dawn* offers a different glimpse into the lives of holocaust survivors. — Kholofelo Maenetsa @KMaenetsa



Column

JENNIFER PLATT

I FEEL deep embarrassment when I have one of those moments where either I don't know how to properly pronounce a word that I must have read a million times (this happens often), or when I have to write a word down that I've heard a few times but don't really know how to spell. That happened with the word krimi.

It has been swirling around the litmosphere when people talk about crime thrillers. And people are now discussing how some of the most original, solid, hard-boiled crime thrillers (krimis) are being written by women. In South Africa we have Karin Brynard and Michele Rowe, to name but two; and you can see the pattern in Kati Hiekkapelto's Finnish detective series starring Anna Fekete; the Nordic noir rockstar Camilla Läckberg; and Iceland's Yrsa Sigurðardóttir. Then there are the police procedurals where US author Elizabeth George's series on Inspector Thomas Lynley shines, Susie Steiner's *Missing, Presumed* is a clever, witty and literary take on the usual cop drama, and Alex Marwood's latest *The Darkest Secret* is taut and compelling.

Back to the word krimi. I thought it was spelt "krimmie", a localised term. So I went down the rabbit hole of the internet

Back to the word krimi. I thought it was spelt 'krimmie'

and found the word on Wiktionary. It's German in origin, shortened from *kriminalgeschichte* (crime story).

Intrigued, I thought about the origin of other genres and went back down the rabbit hole again. The term science fiction first appeared in ads for *Air Wonder Stories* magazine in 1929. Before, those stories were called *scientification*. And the abbreviated form *sci-fi* was only used from 1955.

When and where the romance genre began is a bit more difficult to pin down. Apparently it's from the Latin word *Romanicus* (to write in a Roman style), which came to mean "written in French", French being one of the Romantic languages that evolved from Latin. The less serious stories (usually about chivalrous heroes, knights, magic and dragons, often in imaginary, otherworldly settings), were usually written in French. The term then included all sorts of tall tales, but finally came to mean a love story.

Currently trending is "spec-fic", short for speculative fiction. The term has been around for ages but was made popular in 1947 when Robert Heinlein used it in an essay called "On the writing of speculative fiction". It's an umbrella term that encompasses many different genres from dystopian fiction to alternative history, but it's the "what if?" story. Not always that hard to imagine. **LS**



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Ishtiyahq Shukri weighs up Brexit, the Tshwane unrest, privilege and poverty

THE riots in Pretoria may have been sparked by the announcement of a mayoral candidate, but the level and spread of the violence suggests that it is fuelled by deeper unresolved issues. Many of those go back decades, some even centuries. There hasn't been a reckoning in South



moment. The goodwill of that day on which people felt they had achieved real change has gone. A new generation has grown up. They care little for the amnesties, the negotiated settlements or

the rainbows their parents settled for. They are not impressed by some of the heroes of the struggle so admired by their parents' generation. They weren't there for the love-in, remember? April 27 1994 may have been your day of freedom, but it clearly isn't theirs. And why should it be when they don't live in a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, but in a township at the back of a hill?

● To read the rest of Shukri's piece, go to www.bookslive.co.za



Crossing continents and time zones, this is an extraordinary portrait of a marriage, the forces that hold it together and the pressures that drive it apart.

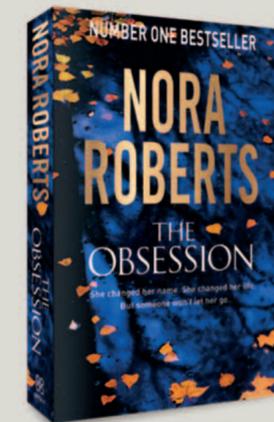


Psychologically acute and perfectly realistic, *The Mandibles* provides a frightening glimpse into the decline that may await the United States all too soon.

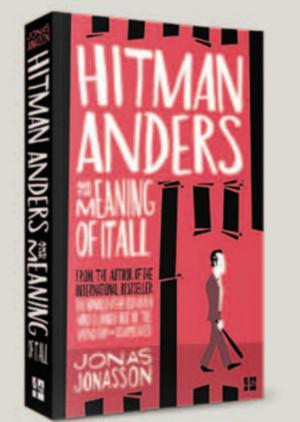
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Filled with Jonas Jonasson's trenchant humour and delightful twists, this is a feel-good adventure story that reminds us it's never too late to start over.