

The Killing of Butterfly Joe ★★★★★
Rhidian Brook
Picador, R285

THE IDEA OF AMERICA

A tale of violence, guns and greed — and the process of storytelling — told from a prison cell, writes **Anna Stroud**

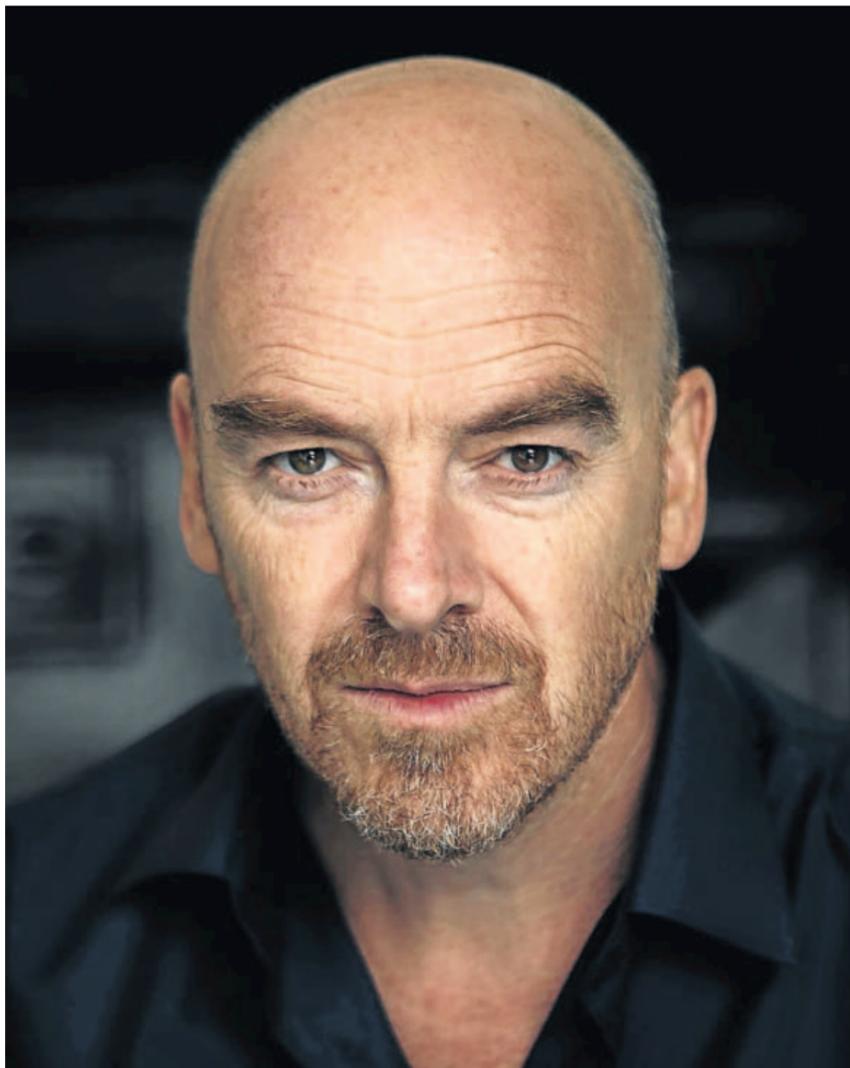
The *Killing of Butterfly Joe* is a fast-paced, neo-gothic thriller that starts in the Catskills Mountains of New York and takes the protagonists on a whirlwind adventure across America. The provocative set-up of the title adds to the sense of dread as the story unfolds, while cutaway scenes reveal the narrator is telling the tale from his prison cell. From the start we know that the narrator, Welsh wannabe-writer Llew Jones, is in for a wild ride when he becomes entangled in the Bosco clan and their butterfly business.

Rhidian Brook is like his main character — a Welsh novelist, except he is successful and living in London with his wife and two children. This year readers can look forward to a film based on his 2013 novel *The Aftermath*, starring Keira Knightley.

Brook explains where this latest novel comes from: “When I was 23 I had a job selling butterflies in glass cases in America. I worked for a guy who, as well as being a butterfly salesman, had ambitions to be America’s first Pope (an ambition he ditched on account of wanting to marry). I drove all over the US and sold in 32 states. It was 1987 and was pre-internet and pre-mobile phone, which increased the sensation of having an adventure in a land far, far away. I was not a novelist at the time but I told myself that I had to write about these butterfly days if I could. And so I did — 30 years later.”

The characters are well-rounded and entertaining. There’s Joe Bosco, the charismatic, dynamic oldest son; Edith, the powerful, terrifying matriarch; Isabelle, the sensible sister; Mary, the sensual sister; and Clay, Elijah and Celeste who, like the narrator, come to the business in unorthodox ways.

Brook says the characters’ interaction is vital to the story: “Llew is coming into an established, albeit eccentric, family in which there are different temperaments and different histories all clashing. Part of Llew’s



Rhidian Brook’s protagonist sells butterflies in glass cases — a job he once had. Picture: Nikki Gibbs

journey is working out who is true and trustworthy. The characters also bring out the best and the worst in our narrator.”

Llew and Joe’s relationship reminds the reader of Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby; Llew is enthralled by the sheer magnitude of Joe’s personality and despite his affection for both sisters, it is Joe he loves.

Joe was inspired by two “untameable, creative/destructive mavericks” in literature, *The Cat in the Hat* and *Zorba the Greek*. There are echoes of Kerouac and F Scott Fitzgerald in the story, and Brook unpacks the notion of the American Dream in a new and refreshing way.

“The American Dream is a chimera. And yet, the sense of possibility — the idea — of America is so powerful it gives you the feeling that you can do and be anything. And

sometimes that happens. Joe actually despises the idea of it — for him it stems from the constitution’s attempt to encode happiness in law. He also thinks it’s a kind of idolatry. In his view America is a religious country but its real religion is money, backed by violence and guns. True religion has been lost.”

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Writing is a central theme as elements of storytelling appear throughout the book. Joe tells Llew, “If it’s your story, you can do what you like with it”, Joe makes up his own words and Llew admits he’s an unreliable narrator. Brook says: “I was interested in the tension between experiencing versus imagining, but also how we can

sometimes stumble into being writers via the most unexpected roads. Llew gets to write his ‘Great Welsh-American Novel;’ just not in the way he expected.” @annawriter_

ALL THAT YOU HAVE IS YOUR SOUL

Michael K ★★★★★
Nthikeng Mohlele, Picador Africa, R220

Nthikeng Mohlele is brave to bring out a book under the heavy shadow of JM Coetzee’s classic *The Life And Times Of Michael K*. His *Michael K* has to stand on his own. And he manages to do just that. Mohlele writes his story beautifully with a tactile sensuality. He arranges words, sentences and paragraphs like a gifted composer.

The book begins with Miles, the narrator, who was Michael K’s doctor in a rehabilitation centre in Kenilworth. We are then transported to Dust Island where Miles meets Michael K, who has nothing but the rags on his body, a few seeds, a bent spoon and a string.

Miles spends 31 months on the island, hoping that being with Michael K will awaken his inner poet. In those months, he is fascinated by Michael K’s harmonious existence with nature. No more than two words are exchanged between them, and Michael K remains an enigma to Miles as he lives a life devoid of earthly trappings.

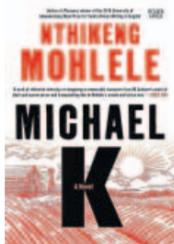
Miles leaves Dust Island following a tragic event. He settles in Johannesburg with the intention of writing poetry, a quest he hopes will get him to live on the periphery of life. Miles soon discovers that, unlike Michael K, he cannot exist merely by the soil.

Miles becomes consumed by Michael K. He questions, prods and dissects Michael K’s existence. How

does a man grow into an adult having not touched and experienced carnal pleasures? A shot of good whisky? A great piece of steak? Having not voted? Not participated in a protest?

Michael K survived wars and deprivation but came out with his soul well on the other side. Maybe, just maybe, Miles thinks, we are not fully living because of the societal, economic, political and cultural pressures. Maybe Michael K was the answer to a life of true freedom for he was beholden to no one. To nothing.

As in his previous novels *Rusty Bell* and *Pleasure*, Mohlele writes with an orchestral precision about the nature of pleasure and existence.



Lorraine Sithole @LS3841

ART

MOTORING

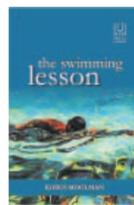
BOOKS

TELEVISION

Review

Book Bites

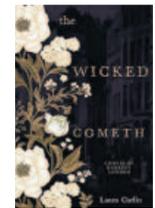
The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories ★★★★★
Kobus Moolman, UKZN Press, R160



Like his poems, Kobus Moolman’s short stories examine life through what can be described as a philosophical lens. The story “Like Father, Like Son” explores the impressions of religion

— its restrictions on desire and language, its racial stratification, and its love, presaging violent discipline in obedience to God, nation and family. Though distinctly South African and context-specific, there is something general about contemporary society. At the same time, “The Rubbish Collectors” is a small story about who cleans up after whom. Whether it’s Maggie who smells of cigars, not perfume, or Jesus waking you up in the night because he has something on his mind, it’s the oracy of these narratives that will keep you turning the pages. @ChantelleGrayvanHeerden @CGrayvH

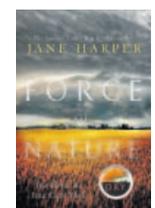
The Wicked Cometh ★★★★★
Laura Carlin, Hodder & Stoughton, R275



“Danger is never overcome without danger,” is how Hester White has survived in the Victorian-era slums since the death of her parents. But fortunes appear to

change when a carriage accident sweeps her into the arms of the wealthy Brock family, under the tutoring care of Rebekah. Yet the aristocratic world is not as far away from the slums as it first appears, tugging the women down into the depths of mystery and murder. A sensuous Gothic tale that is slow to begin, picking up as the plot thickens and twists. @ms_tiahmarie

Force of Nature ★★★★★
Jane Harper, Little Brown, R275



Beware the office team-building experience, especially when they take you out to the wild. In Australia. This is the second outing of Harper’s detective Aaron Falk

and this time he investigates the disappearance of Alice Russell, who vanishes one night after her team of female co-workers lose their way in the forests near Melbourne. Alice is a police informer, forced into getting files on the nefarious dealings of her firm. Falk needs to find out if any of her colleagues or bosses know what she was doing. Harper won plenty of awards for *The Dry*, and the pace, setting and constructed character building of this follow-up will most probably garner more accolades. @JenniferPlatt @Jenniferdplatt