

Chatsworth ★★★★★
Pravasan Pillay, Dye-Hard Press, R190

Pravasan Pillay doesn't like to be labelled as an Indian writer – but the man writes about charou life like nobody else. *Chatsworth*, his debut collection of short stories, is a beautiful love letter to the miscreants, the mothers, the uncles, the girls and the chaos of both life and living in Chatsworth, an Indian township on the southside of Durban.

The stories do not reduce being Indian in South Africa to stale caricatures – although important to the culture there's no mention of cricket, Bollywood, spices or indenture. Apartheid flattened the nuances between Gujarati and Telugu, upper-class merchants and lower-class dockworkers on the Bluff into one mishmash of identity mediated by whiteness, however, there is no single story of Indianness in South Africa. *Chatsworth* works well as it favours depth instead of relying on narrow narratives of working-class people of Indian origin in South Africa.

The multiplicity of characters adds to the sense of intimacy between people and place that Pillay conveys. And intimacy, or how we care or do not care for each other, is

highlighted in some form in all the stories. Sometimes it is heartbreaking and punishing, like in "Chops Chutney" where a daughter falls in love with a man whom her father hates; at other times tender, as seen in the story "Girls" where two teenagers, Arti and Vimla, while planning a makeover by bleaching their

facial hair, are talking about boys and their devotion to Mariah Carey.

In "Crooks" we meet Kamla, a mother who struggles to make ends meet by selling groceries and booze illegally from her house. Her daughter, Ambi, is unemployed and mainly bedridden. As the story progresses, an unsentimental portrayal of a mother-daughter relationship develops, one fraught with tension and sadness.

The timeline of the stories sets them in the near-past, but the interactions and scenarios could be placed in present day. Some issues highlighted in the collection are painfully contemporary, as in "The Albino". The story of an Indian high-school girl who has albinism, and gains popularity mainly because she looks white, is told with such sensitivity and precision that the suspense catches you in your throat, and the story ends in a decidedly precarious place.

Pillay's masterful use of what's colloquially known as Durban-English is



Pravasan Pillay has gathered his short stories into one delightful volume. Picture: Supplied

LITERARY BUNNY CHOW

Pillay captures the essence of Durban, writes **Youlendree Appasamy**

another strength. The rhotic Rs and hybridity of Tamil, Hindi, Afrikaans, Zulu and English that animates a particular South African Indian dialect is written in a way that rolls off the page, as it does off the tongue. Pillay captures the lilting accent perfectly. Those who know will pick up phrases in the stories unique to South Africans of Indian origin such as "katchara people" in "Mr Essop" and "you still got the barracks ways in you" in "Crooks".

In Hindi, *katchara* means trash or rubbish, and the barracks could refer to the Magazine Barracks in Durban where Indian labourers lived (before being forcibly removed to Chatsworth), or to compound life on plantations. In this way, the language reflects some of the history of the inhabitants of Chatsworth. The funny-kind

boys in "The Fence", the Durban Westville student in "The Green Ghost" and Ambi in "Crooks" all speak variations of this kind of speech and the subtlety of the variation is key to their characters.

Chatsworth is the sum of a lifetime's worth of observation, and scenes in the stories come alive not because of the expansiveness, or grandness of storytelling, but the close attention to detail.

While most of the stories have been published previously in literary magazines, seeing them side-by-side in *Chatsworth* lends a pleasant weightiness to the shorts. Like a platter of treats, you can savour each piece and wait before choosing the next one. Or you can binge, and finish the slim book in half a day. 🍴

Intimacy, or how we care or do not care for each other, is highlighted

EXPECT A STING IN THIS TALE

The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock ★★★★★
Imogen Hermes Gowar
Harvill Secker, R290

Late one evening in 1785, merchant Mr Jonah Hancock awakes to a knock on the door. His ship has come in and delivered to him the most peculiar thing – a mermaid! The world's curiosity in his creature thrusts him away from his modest country living into high-society London where he meets Angelica Neal, a dazzling woman of great beauty and a celebrated whore.

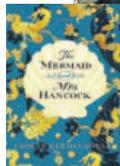
Neither Mr Hancock nor Miss Neal are prepared for the treacherous road that lies ahead, for mermaids are dangerous and mysterious creatures and although they bring

good fortune, they exact payment in the harshest of terms.

The characters are splendid and original: there's tight-lipped Mrs Frost – the keeper of books, secrets and virtue; monstrous Mrs Chappell – an "abbess" who runs a "nunnery" for fallen girls; and, of course, the titular mermaid, who turns the tide of everyone's fortune one way or another.

The men are vastly outnumbered and outclassed by the women in the story: Angelica charms all who dare to look upon her person; Mr Hancock's niece Sukie maintains his household and keeps a critical eye on affairs; and Mrs Chappell swirls around with her entourage – Polly, Elinor and young Kitty – through the glamorous underbelly of London.

The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock flashes



with crisp language and sparkling wit. Effortless and beguiling; as Angelica glides from parlour to bedchamber and the mermaid glimmers through waves of consciousness, so language weaves through the story like fine thread on an elaborate corset. 🍷 Anna Stroud @annawriter_

Book Bites

Death Cup ★★★
Irna van Zyl, Penguin, R230



A notoriously waspish food blogger drops dead in a Hermanus restaurant. The fatal meal was made with the toxic death cap mushroom. Van Zyl's

detective Storm van der Merwe has to unravel the mystery while coping with the usual afflictions suffered by fictional cops the world over: troublesome bosses, irritating colleagues and lacklustre love interests. It makes for an adequate meal, but one that could do with just a touch more spice. 🍴 William Saunderson-Meyer @TheJaundicedEye

The Beast's Heart ★★★
Leife Shallcross, Hodder & Stoughton, R300



Beauty & The Beast is a tale that has been retold and reimagined many times. *The Beast's Heart*, however, is the story from the Beast's point of view. The writing is filled

with long dialogue and heavily adorned descriptions, but Shallcross brings an interpretation that speaks to the modern age, centring around loneliness and depression. 🍷

Tiah Beautelement @ms_tiahmarie

Our House ★★★★★
Louise Candlish, Simon & Schuster, R285



Fiona Lawson comes home to find strangers moving into her house. Her soon-to-be ex is meant to be looking after their two boys in their house. They have a

"birds'-nest" arrangement: he moves in on weekends to have time with the children, while she stays in their apartment. It seems Bram has been hiding quite a bit from Fi: a car accident, being blackmailed and now selling the house. Candlish unveils the story through a series of transcribed podcasts and word documents, placing this well-put-together thriller in real time. 🍷 Jennifer Platt @Jenniferdplatt

Love Like Blood ★★★
Mark Billingham
Little Brown, R300



DI Nicola Tanner asks Inspector Tom Thorne to help investigate honour killings. Both are certain that many deaths dismissed as accident, suicide or

random murder are contracted killings committed in the name of family pride. While Thorne investigates the Sikh, Muslim and Hindu communities, his girlfriend Helen, from the child protection unit, is puzzled by a case of child abuse – until Thorne pulls all the pieces together. Based on a true story which makes it even more of a frightening read. 🍷 Aubrey Paton