

THE TRUTH IN LIES

A man and woman give each other fictionalised stories about themselves, revealing much more than they ever hoped to, writes **Anna Stroud**

In Craig Higginson's fourth novel, *The White Room*, he reimagines and expands the story he started to tell in his 2010 play *The Girl in the Yellow Dress*. The novel opens when playwright Hannah Meade arrives in London for the opening night of her play about a brief period in Paris when she taught English to a young French-Congolese man named Pierre.

To complicate matters, she's invited him to the premiere; but when she spots him with his gorgeous wife, she retreats into the wings and frets over how he will receive it.

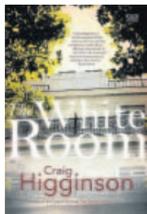
"This book is so much about fiction and representation," Higginson says in an interview. "In the first half of the play before the interval, Pierre is pissed off with her because of the way she represented him, and she stuck quite closely to the facts. But then in the second half of the play, he comes away feeling that something in him has been reached, even though the second half of the play wasn't literally true."

The play within the novel is structured around five grammar lessons. It opens when Pierre spots Hannah at the Sorbonne and, seeing her as a quintessential English girl, stalks her and convinces her to teach him. But the stories they tell each other about themselves are steeped in fiction, and beg the question whether we can ever truly know each other – or ourselves.

Yet sometimes the lies we tell are most revealing. Hannah's self-representation leaves Pierre perplexed.

Higginson's impressive use of language is demonstrated. On the surface it is spare but beneath the simplicity it cajoles the reader into playing a game of words. He writes: "There is an anarchic spirit in her, a kind of reckless impulsiveness that he will ponder over the weeks afterwards. Though she comes across as so perfect, so in control, a shadow seems to lie under everything she says and does."

Hannah is a complex and moody character who hides from the world in books. The only time she's truly alive is inside the grammar lessons, while outside everything is drab and dreary. Meanwhile Pierre (like Echo in the myth of Echo and Narcissus) loses himself in her and becomes a rock that reflects her voice.



The White Room
★★★★★
Craig Higginson,
Picador Africa,
R265

Unlike the original female character in *The Girl in the Yellow Dress*, Hannah is not wealthy, or from the UK. "By making her South African I was able to tap into my own memories of growing up in SA," Higginson says. "There's quite a lot of my own life in there ... there's a lot of me in there and yet the characters are very different from me."

Like Hannah, Higginson was born in Zimbabwe and moved to SA at the height of the Soweto uprising. He also went to boarding school in KwaZulu-Natal, worked in the theatre, lived in England, did a TEFL course in Stoke, and taught English in Paris.

"A recurring theme in my work is the past and traumatic events or secrets from the past," Higginson says. Hannah and Pierre attempt a relationship, but secrets and baggage from their past lives seep into the white room, causing them to hurt one another. "Growing up in SA, one felt a kind of shame all the time. I mean, it's that thing in *The White Room* where you're in this abusive relationship but you don't know if you're the abuser or abused."

The white room represents the room on stage where the action unfolds but it's also the blank page, a clean slate. On another level, it's about whiteness and the centrality it demands for itself. Higginson explains that the novel touches on "the space that whiteness takes up in the world, the room that whiteness asks for itself, and how characters like Pierre have to negotiate that space".

Yet, it's a story that affirms the power of poetry, literature and theatre to reimagine and transform ourselves. "I think we need to absorb fictions in order to heal and find a better vision."

Fierce, sad, inspired *The White Room* stirs the soul. @annawriter_

Picture: Christof van der Walt



Plenty to excite at South African Book Fair

There's plenty to be excited about at this year's South African Book Fair, which will run from September 7-9 at Joburg's Newtown Cultural Precinct. There's so much on offer (about 120 authors) that it's a struggle to pick the highlights.

For something totally different, and if you don't feel like being indoors, there's a Hop On Hop Off Bus Tour that will explore Johannesburg's uneasy relationship with its past and future.

Authors Terry Shakinovsky, Harriet Perlman and Nechama Brodie will take you through the city's historical, political, cultural and culinary sites, as depicted in their writings.

Then, for fans of the graphic novel, authors Loyiso Mkize and Bontle Senne takes readers into the world of African superheroes.

Or for one of the hottest topics, Tembeka Ngcukaitobi, Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama and Marek Hanusch will explore

the complex issue of land dispossession in SA.

In the session Step Into My Womanhood Malebo Sephodi, B Camminga, Anne Dahlqvist and Melanie Judge will discuss their expressions of womanness and in Exposed! SA's Hidden Web of Crime, Mandy Wiener, Anneliese Burgess and Pieter-Louis Myburgh will delve into the underbelly of the crime world.

And for an absolute delight, there's a production of *The Little Prince*, which will be performed by Kwasha!, the Market Theatre Foundation's new theatre company.

It's a magical retelling of the book, mixing storytelling and circus in multiple languages to create a unique South African-inspired production of this French masterpiece.

Go to www.southafricanbookfair.co.za; book at www.webtickets.co.za.



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7-9 September

Newtown Precinct, Johannesburg

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Meet a host of well known writers, journalists and newcomers, including Ralph Mathegka, Richard Steyn, Mandy Wiener, Adv Thembeke Nqckukaitobi, Melanie Judge, Rehana Rossouw, Mpho Dagada, Prof Adekeye Adebajo, Zimitri Erasmus and many more.



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