Set in Zambia over three generations, this long-awaited debut exceeds expectations

Packed with pleasures

FICTION

Leaf Arbuthnot

The Old Drift
by Namwali Serpell
Hogarth £16.99 pp3576

Namwali Serpell, who was awarded the Caine prize for African Writing in 2015, was born in Zambia and moved to America aged nine. Her long-awaited debut, The Old Drift, is a brilliant intergenerational saga set largely in Zambia, following three families from the turn of the century right through to a technologically advanced near-future involving vaccines delivered by miniature drones.

The novel is not for the faint-hearted. Nearly 600 pages long, its prose is so poetic and strewed with surprises that every paragraph demands close attention. As the generations skitter by and the narrative moves between characters, bloodlines tangle (thank goodness for the family tree, which charts how Serpell’s protagonists are related to one another). The characters themselves often have no idea about their connections, even when romantically involved with someone they’d be better off avoiding.

We begin with Percy Clark, a dauntless Victorian photographer who goes to Africa in search of adventure, and is persuaded to remain by the might and mystique of Victoria Falls. Racist and rapacious, Clark treats the Africans under his employ with murderous negligence. One night, he humiliates an Italian settler, angering the man’s daughter so deeply that she in turn attacks a blameless black child, who spends the rest of his life “smiling at the daisies”, probably brain-damaged. The impacts of this drunken incident reverberate subtly over the next 100-plus years, twining the three families’ destinies.

It is hard to say precisely what genre this novel is. Combining elements of science fiction and magical realism, the book is also rooted in Zambian history, covering, for instance, the country’s space programme, launched at the height of the Cold War by an optimistic science teacher. Serpell’s most memorable characters are not her political activists (there are many), but those who seem to have jumped straight out of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, including Sibilla, a woman born with hair so thick and luscious that her facial features are impossible to make out and she moves with a sibilant rustle. There is also Matha, whose ambitions are dashed when she is abandoned by her boyfriend.

Impoverished and pregnant, she begins crying and does not stop. Teardrops crust her cheeks, gum her ears and glue her eyes, but eventually she collects enough of the salted liquid to serve up as a drink.

The book has flaws: it is too long and the time jumps can be confusing. But the wisdom, humour and humanity crammed onto every page more than make up for its shortcomings. Serpell is no sentimentalist – hopes are trashed, villains walk free, heroes lose their lustre, becoming sex workers, alcoholics, paedophiles – yet there are moments of such heart-wrenching poignancy that I had to put the book down several times and recompose myself. Serpell writes with the emotional maturity and sardonic smile of one who has lived several times already. It is the reader’s great privilege to follow her strange and vivid characters from cradle to grave.
Namwali Serpell
Wisdom, humour and humanity