

Lucky Fish! By Reviva Schermbrucker (Jacana)

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South Africa in the 1960s is by now a well documented territory. In particular, we have had several first-person accounts of a white childhood under apartheid: Jean Goosens's *Not All of Us*, Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples*, Jo-Anne Richards's *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*, to mention only a few.

*Lucky Fish!* thus does not break new ground in giving us yet again a first-person account of growing up in the sixties. Where Reviva Schermbrucker's novel departs from the pattern is in being told from the point of view of a boy whose parents were not supporters of the regime, who were indeed active in working against that regime, and paid the price in detention and imprisonment.

In this respect, *Lucky Fish* takes its place rather with, say, *Every Secret Thing*, Gillian Slovo's 1997 family memoir, or the script written by her sister Shawn for the film *A World Apart*. In *Every Secret Thing*, Gillian Slovo recalls Nelson Mandela's response to the death of Joe Slovo, Gillian's father: he told her and her two sisters how his own daughter had reproached him: "You are the father to all our people but you have never had the time to be a father to me." Shawn Slovo, in *A World Apart*, set in Johannesburg in 1963, explored some of the tensions arising out of such parental priorities: in her case her sense of having been excluded from her parents' political activities, which is to say from much of their lives. The price for loss of domestic security, then, is one paid by the children rather than the parents.

*Lucky Fish*, as the only half-ironical title suggest, adopts a slightly different take on this issue. There is a passing allusion, perhaps, to *A World Apart* in a comment by the narrator, Steven Carter, that "There was an element of thrill and danger in keeping the shield up between home and school when they were about to collide. They were two very different worlds, which were to be kept separate at all costs." Here, the shield is between the world of school and the world of home: in terms of this division, Steven sees himself as united with his parents against an alien and possibly hostile outside world. But the child, of course, also has to survive in the world of school, and it would be an exceptional child who did not feel some kind of conflict, if only in the embarrassment of having to explain why both his parents are in prison.

Schermbrucker does not shirk the price paid by the children for their parents' political convictions. Her focus, though, is on the resourcefulness of the children, who, though missing their parents, also experience their "orphaned" state as a kind of liberation. Though the parents, foreseeing their own detention, had made arrangements for the children to be looked after, the children have ideas of their own: above all they do not want to go and live with their Aunt Grace. After the post-graduate student appointed by their mother as their guardian flees in disgust and desperation, the two children move in with the Shapiros, friends of their parents and sympathisers with the Cause. Here, though, it soon becomes evident that political sympathy can take one only so far in the face of the domestic irregularities of a teen-age boy, and the two children are, in effect, evicted. Jane, by now a university student, takes charge, and the two end up in a commune in

Parktown with a group of students, sharing in the rather lax habits and easy morals of these young people.

It is this glorious freedom that Steven's school friends envy him: "You lucky fish you," they tell him. Although there is of course some unintended irony in such a description, Steven by and large goes along with this analysis of his situation: "It was difficult not to gloat over the envy of my school friends. And it was true, my life did seem just dandy. ... I lived in a commune with bohemian university students ... and I didn't have to put up with any parental control." As Steven goes on to comment, in the sixties, as perhaps in other decades too, "The generations were at war in each and every middle class home." Rather than, he seems to imply, parents who can be loved and admired at a distance. But that would of course be too facile a reading. The book does not dwell on Steven's feelings of rejection and anger, but there are subtle indicators throughout of his awkwardness in dealing not only with the situation but with his own emotions and the need to express them: "Inside me was an immense pressure, a welling-up, but I could not translate it into anything but the most awkward motions on the outside." Ultimately, he has been deserted by his parents in the name of a higher duty, and for that he has to, and does, forgive them: towards the end of the book he writes his father a letter: "When you and ma first went to jail I was pretty angry about it. I don't think I knew how angry I was until now. I was embarrassed because it seemed that everybody was talking about our family and I hated that. But I understand now, I do. A person's conscience is more important than anything."

Out of context, this conclusion may seem trite, but in fact it has been earned through the sober and unsentimental rendering of the lives of a group of dedicated, principled and courageous people, who clear-sightedly consented to pay the price of their beliefs. We are told that the story is a fictionalisation of an actual family; it is not the least of the consolations of history or the achievements of fiction that they contain the records of people like these.