

*New Swell* by Byron Loker (Double Storey Books)

A collection of short stories by a single author can involve the reader either by the variety of styles and voice it offers, like collections by Julian Barnes and AS Byatt, or by a consistency of style, a uniform voice, that marks all the writer's stories, however different in subject matter, like the stories of Herman Charles Bosman or Ernest Hemingway.

Byron Loker's collection is in this latter tradition, and indeed, his stories have been likened to those of both Bosman and Hemingway. There is, that is to say, a distinct and distinctive voice lending unity to this collection.

It is tempting to assume that that voice is Loker's own, so convincingly are the experiences described in the first person, so relaxed is Loker in the telling. It is a laconic, off-hand voice, relying on understatement rather than dramatic heightening. But it may be exactly in the relaxed distance from his subjects that the narrative voice is the reverse of autobiographical, in declining to become emotionally involved in the sometimes hair-raising situations he recounts.

Most of the stories are all intensely South African in setting. It is, of course, given the personal bias of the narrative, a very selective take on the South African scene. In this respect the title story is characteristic of the collection as a whole. The anonymous narrator and a group of friends are surfing in Jeffrey's Bay on Election Day, 1998, that is, "South Africa's miraculous second democratic election." The fact that they are surfing rather than exercising their "civic duty" leads the narrator to wonder if perhaps they are being punished for their dereliction of duty by the grim fact that "There's no swell today in J-Bay."

Recalling, as if in mitigation, the first democratic election, the narrator remembers with some satisfaction: "There I was casting my vote in Elands Bay, a tiny town up the Cape West Coast." The reader may wonder at the strange coincidence whereby the narrator should be registered to vote in his favourite surfing spot, but who wants to be curmudgeonly in the face of such puppy-dog exuberance? The real point of the story lies in the "spirit of optimism" that the narrator derived from that day in Eland's Bay; not by any realisation of the solemnity of the occasion, but through a highly un-solemn encounter with some of the local residents, around a shared joint: "I can remember the swell of optimism which rolled in that afternoon. As surfers, we're always waiting for swell."

The rest of the collection is not characterised by any such overt optimism as is expressed here in the image of the "new swell", but the matter-of-fact tone accommodates the pleasures and the inconveniences of living in South Africa with humorous equanimity. It is true, of course, that the somewhat feckless celebration of surfing, smoking and scoring hardly constitutes a reasoned rejoinder to the dark prognostications of, say, *Disgrace*: the stories do not pretend to reflect in any serious way on South African realities, and we would not want them to.

The more sombre aspects of South African life are not shirked, however: the last three interlinked stories deal with the caretaker of the narrator's flat building, one Darrington, and his relationship with his wife Chastity and their baby, the unfortunately-named Hardon. It's in fact, despite the laconic tone of the narration, a sad little story, that could have been, in a different telling, tragic. Here the writer remains too conscious at all times of the physical facts of the situation to succumb to any emotional excess: "The doctor in front was an older woman and behind her was a man and they were wearing white coats and stethoscopes around their necks that bounced as they ran." If the flat naturalism of this recalls Hemingway, other stories, in their deliberately straight-faced contemplation of horrors, recall Bosman. Worth mentioning here is the dark humour of "The

Trouble on the Railway Line”, in which an adulterer meets a fate harsh even by the heartless standards of Bosman.

*New Swell*, then, is a highly accomplished debut collection, making for entertaining and engrossing reading. Given the uniformity of tone and point of view, it is perhaps best savoured in bits as bedside reading rather than gobbled up in one sitting. But the pleasure of the bedtime story may, after all, be the highest delight a short story collection can offer.