

*The Dancing and the Death on Lemon Street* by Denis Hirson: (Jacana)

(Published in the *Sunday Times*)

In *I Remember King Kong (the Boxer)*, Denis Hirson vividly recreated the South Africa of his early youth, in terms of its brand names, its tastes and smells, its folk customs and its rituals. He now revisits that time and that place in this novel, set in a leafy suburb of Johannesburg in the early sixties. He homes in on a few disparate-and-yet-connected households: the recently-widowed Felicity Glanville, with an ardent eye on the enigmatic Mr van Aarden; her long-suffering maid, Rosy, ever expecting the return of her feckless lover Elias; the painter Claire Reynolds and her brutal husband Oliver, and their ever-squabbling children, Jessica and Eddie; the politically active Sam and Sarah Reynolds and their son, Jonathan, who has a teenage crush on the unresponsive Jessica Reynolds.

Hirson skilfully alternates his narrative between these various households and individuals, creating, at first sight, a kind of mosaic of contiguous but unrelated fragments; but as the story unfolds, the fragments start cohering around a central design, and we realise that these people blandly following their own purposes are much more closely tied to one another than they realise: the dancing and the death are two sides of a single coin.

This being South Africa in the sixties, the sub-text, largely unacknowledged by the participants, is the baleful influence of apartheid. At times overtly present, in, for instance, the shooting of Verwoerd at the Rand Easter Show, or the Sharpeville massacre, it more subtly permeates every relation and every scene. Thus even the politically ignorant Felicity is driven by attitudes she has unthinkingly imbibed from her sheltered upbringing, and becomes an unconscious agent in the fate of the political activist Elias...

As a record of a period this novel is, if not unique, invaluable; but it is as an exploration of human need and its frequent disappointment that it is most poignant. The characters are vaguely discontented without quite knowing why: perhaps it is only the adolescent Jonathan Miller who recognises his simple sexual need for what it is; the adults are blindly driven to take out on one another the consequences of the bad faith that they are all party to and complicit in.

The language is richly metaphorical; at times, indeed, perhaps a bit overwhelmingly so (“night air pouring down rare and fresh against the heat of her skin, across the garden, rising up immensely among the scattered, cracked seeds of starlight”). But if Hirson the poet can be obtrusive, Hirson the novelist delivers a taut, well-told tale, tightly constructed and yet

apparently following the random rhythms of human interaction, all the way to their inconclusive conclusions.