

# Found in translation

When writer Michiel Heyns set out to recreate Marlene van Niekerk's Afrikaans novel *Agaat* in English, he found more than even the author had bargained for, writes **Leon de Kock**

**T**HERE'S something about Marlene van Niekerk's fiction that gives it a special purchase — a combination of grimness and hilarity, deadly accuracy and improvisational misrule. In the company of other SA writers, both in English and Afrikaans, it stands alone in one crucial respect: it is ambitious far beyond any ordinary measure, and it is loaded with a narrative energy that you will not find — at the same pitch, or in the same range — in the work of any of the big names in SA writing.

Who else dares write 700-page novels, mixing four different narrative voices: first person, second person, third person and poetic stream-of-consciousness, in one narrative? This is not to mention the devilish wordplay everywhere in Van Niekerk's allusive, sprung, implosive prose.

Who else could find such exquisitely poised black humour in the narrative voice of a dying woman, flat on her back, being tended to in a vengefully meticulous manner by her servant-turned-master?

Who else structures multi-levelled narratives via a series of mirror-pivots, so that the story of the Boer matriarch Milla, and that of *Agaat*, the girl she picked up from the floor at a young age and transformed into a lifelong shadow, cross through each other, end to beginning, beginning to end? (In this English version, T.S. Eliot's line "In my end is my beginning" from the *Four Quartets*, is invoked.)

Who else could make that story reverberate generationally (three critical sets, from the 1940s to the early 2000s), generically (a reinvention of the farm novel), historically (the story carries an epoch of Afrikaner *heerskappy* right through its prime and beyond), formally (the novel's energy is such that it reinvents the boundaries of narrative fiction as it goes along), and allusively (the texture of the writing shimmers with allusive resonance to both high and popular cultural referents).

It seems obvious to say, but few people are saying it: Van Niekerk has rewritten the SA writing manual. She did it once before, with *Triomf* (1994, English translation 1999), and the fact that she has exceeded the manic, crazy fling of that bareback ride is something that few critics expected.

Just as you cannot take the measure of fantasy writing without reading Stephen King's *Dark Tower* novels, so you cannot take the measure of SA fiction without reading Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*, and *Triomf* before it.

And so, just as *Triomf* had to be translated in a rip-roaring spirit befitting the possessed nature of its composition, so *Agaat* too needed to find its own special translational equivalence.

The Afrikaans novel posed a high order of challenge for a translator: the text is set in the Cape Overberg, a world of its own from which a dense intermingling of local voices is summoned, and in which a farming argot is recovered that no longer exists in common usage, let alone in any kind of equivalent English idiom.

In the novel's Prologue, Milla's



**EQUAL TO THE TASK:** Author Michiel Heyns has brought a whole lot of erudition to the text of *Agaat*

son, Jak (an ethnomusicologist who leaves SA for Canada and returns now to his mother's deathbed), reflects on how untranslatable he and his origins are: "Translate Grootmoedersdrift [the family farm to which he is returning]. Try it. Granny's Ford? Granny's Passion? What does that say?"

Which is why Michiel Heyns, the finely accomplished translator-novelist who rendered *Agaat* into

English, doesn't try to translate "Agaat" to "Agatha", or "Grootmoedersdrift" to "Great Mother Stream". Turn to his glossary and you see some of the key markers of a "foreignised" translation: fynbos, goffel, kleinbaas, hanslam, hotnot, kloof, krantz, vas-trap, vlei, vygie...

But Heyns takes translation theorist Lawrence Venuti's injunction to "foreignise" the text in another way too: he uses stresses on individual letters, following Van Niekerk's own jauntily, vociferously stressed vowels and consonants, in a way that is largely strange to English.

So, in Heyns's translation, you'll find a sentences like: "I'm asking, have you péed yet?" ("Ek vrá, het jy al gepié?"); and for "Liewewhere, jy!", Heyns writes: "Good God, yóu!". If you try reading the accented letters out, they don't always work so

well, because English doesn't have the same clipped finality of sound that Afrikaans has, but these unusually accented words do succeed in making the text feel Afrikaans. That's quite crucial, and very difficult to achieve.

Heyns has gone further, though. Controversially for a translator, he has extended the range of literary allusion of a novel already charged with dense cross-commentary invoked via what Heyns calls "Afrikaans cultural goods": songs, children's rhymes, children's games, hymns, idiomatic expressions, farming lore. Not to mention a whole reading list of Afrikaans and English *plaasromans*, which Van Niekerk causes to be dislodged from their bookshelf so that *Agaat* can read out their titles as she repacks them into the bookcase. This list includes CM van den Heever, Olive Schreiner, Etienne le Roux, Nadine Gordimer, Jochem van Bruggen, Karel Schoeman, JM Coetzee, and a raft of others, both highbrow and popular.

At a certain point in this list, Eben Venter's *Ek Stamel Ek Sterwe*, a severely dystopian Afrikaans novel about exile from SA, Aids and meticulously chronicled dying, disappears from the rack and in its place a different title pops up: *As I Lay Dying*. Many readers will recognise the sub-

stitution of Venter with Faulkner. It's a little quirky, because other Afrikaans titles are translated (Van Bruggen's *Die Burgemeester van Slaplaagte* becomes *The Mayor of Colesberg*, for example), but it's also a definite alteration in the novel's machinery of meaning.

Such enhancement comes thick and fast within the first few pages of the novel: Heyns adds an epigraph of his own to Van Niekerk's existing three, taken from TS Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "And last, the rending pain of re-enactment / Of all that you have done, and been: the shame / Of motives late revealed, and the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue".

That crushing last line, with its deadly reckoning, is eerily apt for *Agaat*'s matriarch character, Milla Redelinghuys. Milla's consciousness re-embroiders her life story as she lies dying, paralysed with motor-neuron disease and transfixed with luminous, flooding consciousness.

On the first page of the translation, in the lyrically allusive Prologue, Heyns spices into the prose words from Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* — words that, at the same time, are a dead-normal literal translation of the Afrikaans sentence in question. The Pound-derived English

line reads: "the wet black apparitions of winter", for the Afrikaans's (*die nat blink dinge van die winter*). Then, in the next line, Heyns interlaces a line from Wordsworth's *Prelude*: "A very heaven, the time of my childhood", for 'n *Hemel, my kindertyd* — very apt, and very, very smart!

Heyns continues this remarkable ventriloquism with a line from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, "blood shaking my heart", which also happens to translate the Afrikaans phrase, *dat jou hart daarvan oorslaan*. Believe me, speaking as a literary translator, that's good. That's truly excellent.

And so it goes: Shakespeare, Blake ("O rose thou art sick" slips in without a literal precedent in the original), a lot of Eliot, Auden, Owen, Donne, Hopkins.

So, if scholars and students were at all inclined to do close textual work, which they are no longer very interested in doing, they would find in Heyns's translation a complete study on its own.

This is a case where the author collaborated with the re-engineering of reference in her own novel. In an interview, she said: "Michiel brought a whole lot of erudition to the text, and took it into his structures and machinery. I felt it entirely *gerymd* [in keeping] ... the book is at some points quite explorative in its sentences and quite improvisational in its developments of certain thoughts, and I ... was comfortable with it because I felt it was congruent."

So the best way to read *Agaat* is to read it twice, because it's been written twice. First in Afrikaans, then in its extended English version. It's the kind of book that you have to read twice anyway, because its beginning lies in its ending, and its ending draws you back to the beginning.

At the core of the novel lies a chilling narcissism which resides in the deepest, most intimate heart of Afrikaner life in the mid to late 20th century. "My main interest and main obsession," says Van Niekerk, "was the workings of power in intimate relationships ... What I wanted to push hard is how people can abuse each other while they love each other. The idea that drove the whole thing ... was how someone who is subjected to a form of power, can take aspects of that power and mime them back, and make themselves stronger in the process ..."

Van Niekerk, and now Van Niekerk and Heyns, have ransacked the SA pastoral and reworked it with a complexity that few SA novels in any language have yet achieved. *Agaat*'s publication in English is an event of unusual note. A masterpiece has arrived. Let us treat it accordingly. If you want to get a sense of this novel's literary measure, think Joyce, think Marquez, think Tolstoy. That's how good it is.

● Leon de Kock translated Van Niekerk's first, multi-award-winning novel, *Triomf*

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**EPIC BOOK:** Marlene van Niekerk

