

## ***Book Review: The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories (Kobus Moolman)***

**Reviewed by Anne Finger**

The other day, browsing in a give-away pile of books one of my neighbors had set out on the sidewalk, I picked up a few treasures—a memoir by a gay Jew who survived World War II in Berlin, Fay Weldon's *Letters to Alice: On First Reading Jane Austen*. And also a book which seems the opposite of a treasure: the play *Joe Egg*—which, the cover copy told me, opened on Broadway in 1968 after a long run in London. It concerns "the problems of a young couple with a spastic daughter"—the 'Joe Egg' of the title. The cover goes on to quote a reviewer who describes it as a "remarkable play about a nightmare all women must have dreamed at some time, and most men: living with a child born so hopelessly crippled as to be, as the father in it says brutally, 'a human parsnip'." I didn't need a reminder of how brutal and nightmarish the literary treatment of disabled people has sometimes been, but I got one nonetheless. I also got a reminder of how the disabled figure in literature has served, in the words of Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, as a "narrative prosthesis"—setting plots in motion, shoring up normalcy elsewhere in the text, serving as a device allowing other characters to work out their fate.

What might a text look like in which disability is present—present not as a metaphor, not as a lodestone for the fear, the pity, the repulsion of non-disabled characters? What does disability look like in a text when it is simply present, enmeshed in the lived experiences of the work's characters, intertwined with race, with class, with boredom, with curiosity, with longing? The finely-crafted stories of *The Swimming Lesson* provide an answer to those questions.

Several of the early stories of this collection concern an unnamed narrator, a white South African disabled boy, or an adult looking back on his life as that boy. In the collection's title story the narrator counts off laps as he swims; immersed in the world of water, he is in a state which is not that of dreams, but certainly not the workaday world, either. Memories and images float through his mind: Aunt Maggie—who wasn't really his aunt, but was addressed by that honorific—who taught him to swim. Her smell of cigarillos. His own mother's smell of baby powder. Learning in school that the human body is 70% water; his sense that planets and asteroids, stars and moons, float through dark space, while he himself floats through the water. Having to leave swimming classes ten minutes early so he has time to lace himself into his heavy orthopedic boots with the lift on the right side. A tension is set up within the narrative between the meandering quality of the narrator's mental process and the straight, back and forth, back and forth of counting off the laps in the pool. In the hand of a less skilled writer, Moolman's rendering of the narrator's thoughts, as he swims the final lap, could have come across as sentimental, the tired trope of the disabled person saved by the non-disabled other: "Maggie saved me. By teaching me to swim... When I swam, I no longer walked lopsided. I no longer dragged my right foot. My right knee did not buckle with every step. I no longer fell over. On my face. I floated instead." The protagonist's physicality has been so finely rendered here that we sense, not a deliverance from disability, but an experience of fleeting ease, of no longer having to force the body to do what it can barely do.

Part of the reason that the experience of Moolmans narrator rings true here, and doesn't become an occasion for poignancy or condescension, is that this story passes the Fries Test. Perhaps you're familiar with the Bechdel Test, brainchild of writer Alison Bechdel: Does a narrative work—fiction, play, film—feature two women who talk to another—about something besides a man. (Its amazing how few works pass this test.). The disabled writer Kenny Fries test asks: Does a work have more than one disabled character? Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character? Is the characters disability not eradicated either by curing or killing? The unnamed narrator isnt the only disabled person in "The Swimming Lesson"—there's also Maggie's husband, who had polio; and a relative of Maggies, a dwarf, who works in a circus, and comes to stay with Maggie sometimes.

In other stories, Moolman conveys the boy's world with a few deft strokes: he's part of a family not poor, but struggling to cling to the middle-class, even if only to the very bottom rung of the ladder. They hold on with religion and a life bounded by rules, rules about everything from how bread should be buttered to not wearing jeans—something only drug users do, at least according to his mother; the wash line kept out of sight at the bottom of the garden. Sometimes, reading these stories—which seem to be set in South Africa before the end of apartheid, I had a sense of the real story being what's unspoken, in the margins and between the lines. In "Like Father, Like Son," when the family maid, Sweetness, hurries in at Fathers call, with a "Ja, baas," a few simple words convey much about the world of apartheid South Africa. In many of these stories, the author is winding up throughout the story, delivering a punch to the gut in the final paragraph or two. "Like Father, Like Son" is such a story, although the title gives more away than I would have liked.

As the collection progresses, the stories grow less stark, more complex. "Kiss and the Brigadier" may demand more than one reading, but it rewards that re-reading. Written in Afrikaans inflected English—Google translate often failed me, but googling "Afrikaans slang"—took me to a helpful Wikipedia page—the story seems at first to be a meandering conversation among some layabouts intent on nothing more than drinking beer, listening to Kiss, and avoiding a funeral going on in their town. Without giving too much away, we reach the end of the story with an understanding of how the violence of apartheid redounds throughout South Africa.

If some of his stories are not successful—I think of the final one in the collection, "To Whom It May Concern"—I was struck by Moolman's willingness to take risks, and to fail. This is extraordinary work, and Moolman certainly should gain a wider audience.

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Author: Kobus Koolman

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*Anne Finger is a writer of fiction—both short stories and a novel—as well as a writer of creative non-fiction. Her short story collection, **Call Me Ahab** the winner of the Prairie Schooner Award, was*

*published by the University of Nebraska Press. Her most recent publication is the novel [A Woman, In Bed](#) published by Cinco Puntos Press in 2017.*

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