



WHEN THE VILLAGE SLEEPS

Author: Sindiwe Magona
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Reviewer: Lorraine Sithole

When *The Village Sleeps* is such an amazingly woven story demonstrating our interconnectedness as a people.

The story is told through the lives of four amaTolo women, Khulu, the grandmother who has retired to the village after labouring as a domestic worker all her life for a White family in Cape Town. She should be resting and enjoying her twilight years but worries about her daughter, Phyllis, who, though she has taken over her old job, battles to make ends meet. Busi, the granddaughter, who carried the hopes and dreams of the family but was rejected by her father, makes a tragic, life-altering decision. Mandlakazi, the great-granddaughter, never given a chance at life, has turned out to be a lighthouse who carries her shortcomings with grace and humility. They are all not only connected through familial ties; they are also part of a community whose dreams of a better life, 27 years into a democratic South Africa, are still not fulfilled.

Magona, as in *Forced To Grow*, her biography, weaves together a national and personal history. As someone who came of age in apartheid South Africa and worked herself out of the doldrums, Magona's disappointment in this new, free and democratic South Africa is evident. This disappointment is evident in her description of the township and the city in the novel. In the township Busi and her mother, Phyllis, reside in a backroom at Busi's aunty's house. It's a world far removed from the city where Busi has the privilege of attending a well-resourced Model C school and has no cause to complain since the schools in the townships are decaying. This is the same city where Phyllis works, where everything works, from the waste collectors to the constant electricity supply and, like the American Dream, every

house has a tap unlike in the village where Khulu is hoping to retire.

The transitioning of the language between isiXhosa and English forces the reader to sit up and read closer because our native languages are so descriptive and shoot to the heart. Though it was traumatic to read, I loved this novel. Such a brutally honest, textured and layered narrative. The musicality of Magona's writing imbued the text with a poetic, folklore-esque element.

I like the novel's idea of returning to the source, the earth. The concept of establishing self-sustaining communities, but on what land? Black South Africans are landless people. This "returning to source" reminded me of another book, *Wilder Lives: Humans and Our Environments* by Duncan Brown, which left me emotionally scarred, after reading it in 2019, for advocating self-sustainability through living off the earth, foraging and windowsill gardening, and so on. Fantastic if you can trudge through a heap of uncollected rubbish in Diepsloot where you live or if you are quick enough to dodge a stray bullet while picking coriander from your windowsill on the Cape Flats.

When The Village Sleeps offers me hope. Hope that we can still do better to create a brighter future for our children.



Lorraine Sithole is an enthusiastic reader, board member of the African Book Trust and founder of BookWorms Book Club. She was the curator of the South African Book Fair for 2018 - 2020.