

Absent: The English Teacher

by: John Eppel

review: Michiel Heyns

John Eppel's latest novel is, among many other things, an example of Loser Lit in its most literal sense. Its protagonist, George J George, loses, in quick succession, his job, his car, his house and all his possessions and, ultimately, his life.

This crude synopsis may seem to promise some exceedingly gloomy reading. But Eppel's account of George's declining fortunes is enlivened by a satirical bent, mainly at the expense of the new Zimbabwe and its perennial expectation of "the mother of all agricultural seasons".

Zimbabwe's new ruling class is set up for ridicule through the long-suffering eyes of George. Backing his uninsured Ford Escort into the Mercedes belonging to one Beautiful Nyamayakanuna, mistress to the Minister of Child Welfare, Sweets and Biscuits, George becomes the house boy - in effect the slave - of Mrs Nyamayakanuna.

She addresses him in fanagalo, "because that is how she remembered being addressed by white people when she was a girl". In other respects, too, she treats him much as white Rhodesians treated their black servants (though her children, Helter, Skelter and Ultimate are unexpectedly well-mannered). Eppel does not forget the present injustices are built on a history of injustice.

George's only indulgence is lusting after the elusive though provocative Wilhelmine, a German NGO worker, who is involved with a small-grains expert. The portrayal of Wilhelmine, an awkward blend of eroticism and satire, is not this novel's happiest aspect, although it could be argued this reflects George's ambivalence in the face of his hopeless passion.

Satire by its nature deals in bold outlines and flat surfaces rather than subtly rounded portrayal, and in depicting modern-day Zimbabwe Eppel employs the bludgeon rather than the rapier.

The crass materialism of the rulers and their ruthless exploitation of the land; the manifest injustice of the judicial system; the breakdown of all amenities except those available to black marketeers; the veneration of Mugabe by those who profit by his despotism; the suffering of those of his subjects who do not kowtow to him - these are familiar targets, which Eppel deals with in devastating deadpan.

But the novel has more to offer than the demolition of a bankrupt regime. As the title suggests, George was an English teacher before his dismissal. The novel is interspersed with memories of his teaching days as well as extended scenes of his coaching the Nyamayakanuna children in the finer detail of Shakespearian metre. The local police chief has George arrested whenever he needs help on his Open University assignments on Hamlet or Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat. Since these coaching sessions

are presented verbatim, the reader is party to a fair amount of very esoteric literary analysis.

Eppel is an English teacher too - on this showing an excellent if idiosyncratic one - and he is clearly trotting out with justifiable pride some of his pet theories on these texts. As yet another ex-English teacher, this reviewer found this aspect of the novel fascinating, though it is difficult to say with confidence it will appeal to a wide readership.

Keeping together, albeit somewhat tenuously, this strange mixture of things, is the central plot concern of the novel, George's caring for the little lost girl he discovers in front of his gate, and whom he undertakes to return to her home in the Mpande Communal Land. This quest provides George with a much-needed mission in life, and Eppel with an opportunity to portray something of the beauty of his native land and its history.

True to the tradition in which the Loser traditionally triumphs over the cussedness of things, to reclaim at least some dignity in defeat, George, too, achieves some minor heroism in the restoration of the little girl to her home.

For all its robust humour, *Absent: The English Teacher* is a sad novel, a lament for a ravished country and the many lives wasted in pursuit of power for the few. It may be too divided in purpose to be a perfect novel, but it is a fascinating addition to the range of novels that have tracked Zimbabwe's growth to independence and its subsequent decline into despotism.

It is a matter for celebration the battered country is still capable of producing literature of this quality.

Published on the web by Sunday Independent on July 18, 2009.