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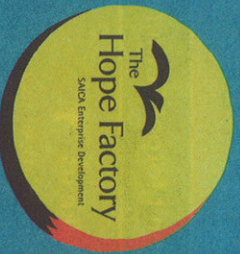
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BOOK REVIEW: THE MIRACLE OF CROCODILE FLATS

This 'croc' is a true thoroughbred

MICHAEL SHAWTO

BOOK REVIEW: *The Miracle of Crocodile Flats* by JENNY HOBBS, Umuzi. Price: R 185,00

THIS is a remarkable book from a remarkable writer. Jenny Hobbs is our Anne Tyler, though with a cutting edge somewhat more jagged, less forgiving. She's our Dickens, too – think "Pickwick Papers", his vast cast of characters.

If MGM were to consider making a film of it, they could justifiably use that old advertising cliche, "with a cast of thousands". It's not quite that many who live and work in the rundown village of Crocodile Flats, but it comes pretty close. Close enough to demand quite some attention by the reader to the doings, the comings and goings of the novel's vast horde of characters.

Hobbs, who with this offering has written six novels almost without putting a foot wrong, takes an actual event – an alleged sighting several years ago of the Virgin Mary in rural South Africa by a black girl (similar visions were reported as well in other parts of the continent) – and builds her tale around it.

Fancy Crocodile Flats is populated by a poor rural community, subject to all the ingredients that make such South African towns so unique. The village is coming apart at the seams. It is peopled by the poorest of the poor, blacks and whites living by their wits. A dilapidated hotel, The Outspan, which is not much in the way of decent accommodation or even liquor for its shabby bar, is at its hub. This and a scattering of other shops, a gang of juvenile delinquents and other weird characters populate this area which acts as a buffer between a conditioned off-African, "homebant" known as "Vandeleiden" and a small Roman Catholic community of nuns and their priest, Father Liam, who played rugby for Ireland.

Ward and wonderful names keep cropping up – Vigilance, Rejoice, Sila Barker, who sweats like a trooper; Lucky Boys, Mr Drinkwater, an alcoholic.



ic, Henrik Ossewa, Prophet Hallekijah and dozens more.

The novel's time span is not that long ago – just a few years after the coming of democracy. Into the middle of it all walks teenager Sweetness Molo, Shopping in a burnt-out hut as she hurries home, she is confronted by this manifestation – the appearance of Mother Mary (Ma-Jesu) and what's more, she's black.

Crocodile Flats will never be the same again. News spreads like wild fire. Soon a black minister of the new government, attending an international conference in Geneva, is phoning his deputy, Henrik Ossewa, to get an investigative party on its way to Crocodile Flats and report back pronto! Hot on their heels are a delegation from the Catholic Church in Johannesburg, instructed from the Vatican to follow up on this phenomenon.

News agencies are soon alerted, but a freelance, Rod Greyling, has already scooped them all. The local nuns are readying themselves for an interview with the Catholic delegation. The Catholics aren't the only interested party in Holy Joe Row. What will the Prophet Hallekijah do about this? He cannot allow the Catholics to steal the religious limelight. Somehow he must turn this to his advantage.

And just to complicate matters, Sweetness suddenly wishes more of it had ever happened. She wants no part of it and disappears into hiding. Novelist Hobbs manages somehow to orchestrate all these disparate strands, smoothly moulding them into a satisfying melonious whole. The beauty of it is the way she serves it up – so utterly, unapologetically S.African. Ms Hobbs describes her book as "an affectionate satire". Methinks that, in fact, much of it reflects how affectionately this writer really sees this country for which she has so much love.

The chapters are short, mostly limited to just three pages in which Ms Hobbs reveals herself as an artist of true merit. Buy it, read it, enjoy it! If it isn't judged to be among the best South African literary efforts next Year, come Fiction of the Year time again, I will be genuinely amazed.

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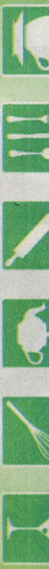
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