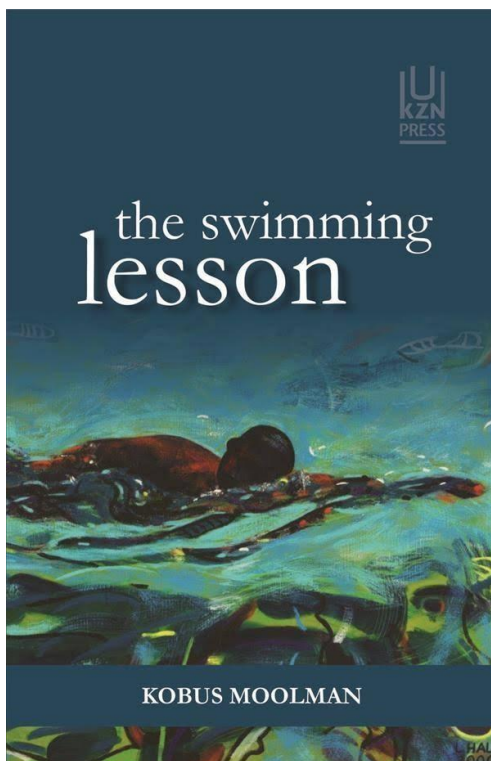


Review of Kobus Moolman's: *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories*

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Kobus Moolman's *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories*, was launched at the Book Lounge in Cape Town on 13 June 2017. Moolman is an accomplished poetry and prose writer, with his 2015 collection, *A Book of Rooms*, winning the 2015 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry. In 2016, he joined the staff of the English Department at UWC and works with students enrolled in the Creative Writing Master's

programme. I greatly enjoyed *A Book of Rooms* and so I was delighted to have the opportunity to review *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories*.

Moolman's latest work is a slim volume that contains ten self-contained short stories and is published by UKZN Press. *The South Africa* of this collection is recognisable as the "old one" and Moolman makes no effort to adopt an overtly political position or dissect "whiteness" in any way. This may worry some readers, but

Moolman's intentions make perfect sense as the stories unfold. His work is no myopic nostalgic meander back into white privilege. Far from it, the world he writes about is fraught and complex, so, as the title metaphorically suggests, staying afloat requires effort.

In the opening story, *Shelter*, the narrator unfolds an episode in the life of a young boy and explores the boy's anxieties and lived challenges all the while leading the reader to a most satisfactory denouement. We know that it is challenging for adult writers to recreate the lived experience of children yet Moolman achieves this without ever appearing mawkish or sacrificing authenticity. *Shelter* is beautifully written with engaging content and a style that is sublime and instantly recognisable to those who know Moolman's poetry. It is an impressive start to the collection and what follows does not disappoint.

The story, *The Swimming Lesson* (from which the collection's title derives) propels us back into the world of a young boy, though in this case a first-person narrative suggests an element of autobiography. For me, the particular strength of this story is Moolman's innovative structural framework – the story is broken down into numbered “laps” - small sense units that intersect to create a satisfying whole. As a middle-aged white male, I found some of the references to items as diverse as a “one-piece costume” and the “green Chevy El Camino” wonderfully evocative of the early 1970s. Those, and the oblique mention of the old and glamorously choreographed cigarette ads in cinemas, would likely be lost on a millennial audience, but then this is Moolman's creation and he can set it out and texture it however he chooses. Small details like these do not detract from another powerful and tightly wrought story that is quite different in many respects to the first.

A significant departure in the collection is *Kiss and the Brigadier*. The story has an astonishing opening: "Fok" said Willem. Fok, fok, fok." What follows then is at once a wickedly funny torrent of increasingly obscenity-laced scheming between three layabouts: Willem, Kleinjan and JJ. Fueled by cigarettes and "tallies" (quarts of beer) they hatch a crazy plan of thieving mayhem in a black comedy that mounts as quickly as the pools of vulgarity that spill from their lips. Moolman's ear is finely tuned to the unique patois of outsider petty criminals and the story, though unconventional in punctuation deployment, is deeply engaging.

Given that this collection spans fewer than 100 pages, the range of stories and the treatments Moolman applies in each case is noteworthy. The mysterious "Daily Bread" is something of a modern horror story employing quite ordinary characters that play out in broad daylight in a small Karoo town. "Extracts from a dispensable life" is a tragic story, with a child narrator. Moolman's experimentation with the genre's form includes the insertion of lines from Protestant hymns. Another, quite different piece is "Like Father, Like Son". Here Moolman tackles the tricky issue of sexual taboo to produce a tightly wrought and suspenseful piece. In all the stories, the characters are recognisable, the contexts often familiar yet the outcomes unknown and all wrought in a unique and original way.

It did not take long for Moolman to capture my attention entirely and I found myself compelled to read the entire collection in one sitting, a circumstance I am sure other readers will similarly experience. *The Swimming Lesson and Other Stories* is recommended both as a general addition to a personal library for sheer reading pleasure and for those who seek to engage with issues centred around disability, patriarchy and gendered otherness.

- Dr Mike Hagemann