
BOOK REVIEW

Williams Paul. 2013, *Cokcraco: A novel in ten cockroaches*, Westgate, NSW: Lacuna. ISBN 978 1 92219 8082.

'From the point of view of da Cockroach, all languages are da languages of the Oppressor' (pg.6)

Cokcraco: A novel in ten cockroaches by Paul Williams is a clever and playful novel that resurrects Kafka's motif of the cockroach. Whereas Kafka uses the cockroach to evoke notions of isolation and disconnection, Williams' cockroaches challenge socially constructed ideological perspectives. Having worked with this soft-spoken author at the University of the Sunshine Coast, I was pleasantly surprised by Williams' evocation of such a satirical voice that is at once scathing and spirited. The voice of the cockroach, evoked through the fictional author Sizwe Bantu, repositions the notion of 'pest' onto the destructive human: 'COCKROACH: Once they [humans] colonise a territory, it can be a real challenge to eliminate them... Their love of turning pristine wildernesses into sterile concrete nests and burrows is well documented' (pg. 21). The cockroach is used to expose the gap between seemingly antithetical standpoints; creator and critic, colonised and coloniser, perception and reality. The innovation of this work resides not only in the multiplicity of the voices presented, but also the structure of the novel.

Timothy Turner, an Australian academic, travels to South Africa to assume a teaching position at the University of eSikamanga as a replacement for the disgraced professor, Mxolisi Makaya. Unwittingly, Timothy finds himself in the middle of a fierce conflict between the creative writing minded educators—Makaya and his protégé Ngwenya—and the literary critics, represented by Zimmerlie and Mpfu. Timothy's motivation for taking up the position is to discover the true identity of the reclusive African writer, Sizwe Bantu, who was the focus of his doctoral dissertation. In fact, Timothy's obsession with Sizwe Bantu manifests into a type of idol worship, complete with a cockroach shrine. Timothy's single-focused fixation on Bantu and his inability to comprehend the South African landscape produce humorous, and sometimes awkward, events. Timothy is swept up by the events around him and his lack of agency—even when he thinks he is taking a stand—renders him helpless as the plot unfolds. In fact, this could be one critique of the work. The use of the second person point of view, while appropriate to control the pace of the revelation of Bantu's identity, does create moments of frustration and annoyance with the main character. His naivety is somewhat contradictory to his obsession with the South African, Sizwe Bantu, as his research required investigation into the cultural and social aspects that informed Bantu's writing. Then again, this incongruence also serves to depict the gap between lived experience and artistic representation.

Williams' novel is at once a second person narrative, an epistolary fiction, a literary dissertation (complete with footnotes and a list of references) and a postmodern treatise exposing false binaries. Each chapter begins with an encyclopaedic entry chronicling a specific type of cockroach, revealing their characteristics and pervasiveness. These entries serve as a frame for the chapter, mirroring the difficulty of reversing preconceived perspectives and stereotypes. The satirical use of the travel guide aptly entitled *Crowded Planet* positions Timothy as the 'foreign other' attempting to navigate the South African space. Timothy's reliance on this information creates comical scenes of misinterpretation; while simultaneously revealing how social media continue to perpetuate stereotypical perspectives. At times the novel overtly draws attention to the cleverness of its meta-fictional elements, creating disjointed moments, which can temporarily pull the reader out of the story. While the mystery of Sizwe Bantu's identity is the main storyline of the book, the multi-layered approach introduces key subplots that are also intriguing. I was particularly enthralled with Timothy's past relationship with 'M', evoked through a smattering of unsent letters. These angst-filled letters present the construct of identity on a more personal level, adding another layer to this multi-dimensional novel.

These elements, coupled with the inter-textual allusions to various African writers and Williams' stylistic decisions, serve to make the novel enjoyable to read. As a multi-vocal epistolary novel, this story will appeal to a wide readership: those interested in a particularly well-crafted post-modern story of discovery as well as those 'kritiks' who enjoy unpacking the significance in the portrayal of the constructed self.

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