

FICTION

Well-drawn portrait of the Muslim community

THE FALL OF THE BLACK-EYED NIGHT
By Sean Badal (Umuzi)

JANE ROSENTHAL

His debut novel is interesting for a number of reasons. Its Cape Town settings include an upmarket Foreshore hotel, the mountain and Athlone. Shehzad Shadili is the main character, a young Muslim man, working in the hotel as one of its higher minions. His father has recently been displaced by a new imam at an Athlone mosque.

Shehzad presents a smooth,

charming and efficient front to the world, but has returned from London, where after the July 2005 bombs the lives of ordinary Muslims have been made very difficult. He carries the traumatic memory of a humiliating raid on a friend's flat and subsequent interrogation.

Back in Cape Town trouble is brewing around a proposed golf estate (the very phrase is coming to be code for corruption and greed in the name of a paradise for a few). This developers' project will engulf a kramat and the grave of Shehzad's grandfather.

The new imam, from Saudi Ara-

bia, turns out to be involved with the developer who is one of the long-term guests at the hotel. Add to this mix a nubile but basically nice daughter of the developer.

In some ways this is light and easy reading. It has some amusing moments and Shehzad's brother, Jay (shortened from Jihad which he decided he couldn't live with), is a well-drawn portrait of a young man full of energy and intelligence, but no longer committed to the Muslim imperatives of their imam father, whom they nevertheless both still love. For this reason the brothers devise a plan to defuse a fatwa.

There is a certain uneasiness in this disjunction and the reader is left unsure as to which world is more important to Shehzad and indeed to Badal

This is an interesting addition to portrayals of the Muslim communities in South Africa. The writing is a bit patchy: in places quite slick and in others very powerful.

Badal's many references to Persian poetry, songs and prayers give the novel a dimension of spirituality which is in strong contrast to its worldly preoccupations.

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Stinging 'klaps' at colonialism

Wicomb's latest short-story collection is an indispensable addition to the bookshelves of serious lovers of South African fiction, writes **JANE ROSENTHAL**

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY
By Zoë Wicomb (Umuzi)

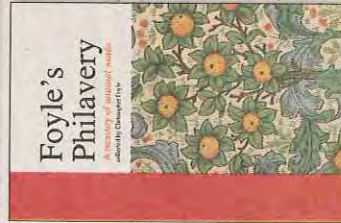
The short stories in this collection are loosely linked by a character in one story that crops up again in another. They are set in the Cape and in Glasgow and reflect Zoë Wicomb's unique experience of living in these two places.

They deal mostly with relationships, but with an interesting slant

in that Wicomb examines the cross currents of intercultural marriage, or the results of such mixes several generations down. Colonialism and the use of art, then and now, are also woven into the mix, as are the effects of marriages on friendships and the broader community.

The stories are elegant and clever; Wicomb draws on her Griqua-Scottish roots and her everyday life in Glasgow.

This enables her to get inside the heads of the ordinary, often working-class, women who people her stories. (There are male characters, but



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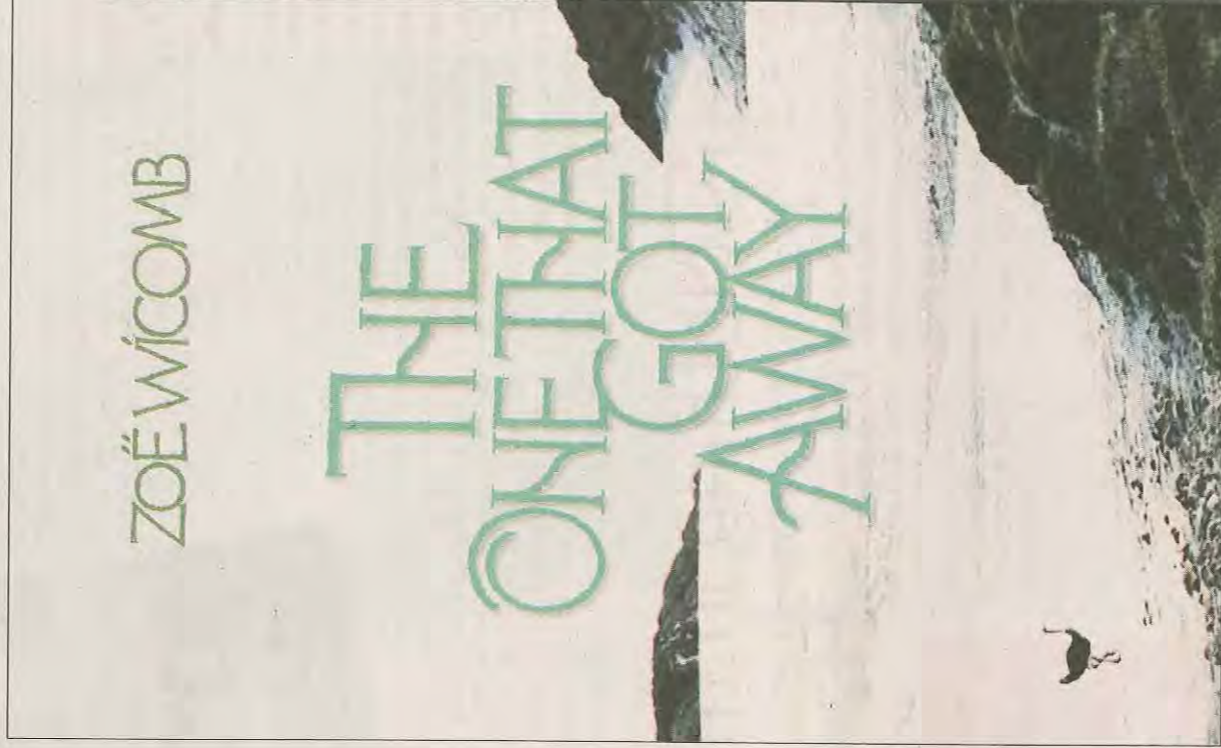
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SPRING READING



himself, or whether Badal intended to draw this contrast.



which gives rise to some comic commentary.

Janie, who is without "airs and graces" herself, is nonetheless the beneficiary of an education, but knows nothing about art. On a visit to Glasgow she makes a real wifely effort to look at the available art her husband is so excited about. Her interpretation of the Doulton Fountain — a colonial monument with scenes from the various British colonies — is a stroke of genius in the field of *regmakers* and *regstellige aksie*. She strikes a blow for all the Kaatjies and Saartjes of the Cape when she expounds on this "monument to miscegenation" right in the heart of Glasgow. "Kaatjie has been sitting there, bathed in grace, for more than a century, unembarrassed."

When it comes to language, Wicomb doesn't pussyfoot around with translations of the untranslatable. *Gevrek* is the word she uses. *Wittebrood, bedonderd, dronklap*. No glossary. Many of her readers will be delighted, from the Sundays River (where Saartjie Baartman is now buried) to Stellenbosch and further west. This language is startling and fresh in any context, and a plain claim to space and dignity.

Not all the stories work around this specific theme of what has happened to coloured women and incidentally, men at the Cape. *Nothing like the Wind* tells the story of a young coloured girl who at the age of 13 is whisked off to Scotland as an exile or emigrant. This is poignant and gently observed. And then there is *N2* in which a young boy from the squatter camps lining the road helps a white couple who have a puncture; here anger overcomes need. And then, in *Another Story*, a woman steeped in decency and respectability learns to show some defiance to cops making an arrest and turning the house upside down at the crack of dawn.

The connections between the stories are not always immediately or easily noticed. For example, the work of the pompous historian from a different story is tucked away, having become part of a whimsical and rather obscure art work made by Janie's husband.

Wicomb circles around within the loose structure, skilful and assured, tying a few strong knots. A second reading will prove even more enjoyable.

This is an indispensable addition to the bookshelves of serious lovers of South African fiction. And at last we see some short stories being published, recently inexplicably neglected by publishers here. Wicomb can stand her ground in this area with Annie Proulx and Alice Munro, women from other ex-colonies.

they seem secondary).

Wicomb puts her theoretical academic background to good use to take the mickey out of colonialism. I might even say she delivers a few stinging *klaps* directed mainly at the colonisers and others who affect superiority or even an excessive commitment to respectability and decency. But it's done in a way that makes you think of dancing and laughing, without anger.

In the words of a working-class coloured woman, not in Wicomb's stories, but known to the reviewer: "Every dog has its day, *maar as myme kom, is it sommer 'n hele weekend*." Readers of Wicomb's earlier fiction will know that she has explored in depth the history of colonialism in the Cape, including that of the Griqua people and the apartheid era.

Probably the most sympathetic character in these stories is Janie, who appears in two of them. Daughter of a Cape Town charlady, she is married, to her mother's shock and horror, to an artist — a situation

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