



## Across My Desk

VIVIEN HORLER

These are some of the books that landed on our Book Editor's desk this week. Some will be reviewed later



**Playing the Enemy, John Carlin (Atlantic Books/Penguin):**

John Carlin was a reporter for the London Independent newspaper based in South Africa at the time of our political transition. In his view the Rugby World Cup final in 1995, when Nelson Mandela appeared on the field at Ellis Park wearing the Springbok captain's rugby jersey, was "the last act of the most improbable exercise in mass seduction ever seen: Nelson Mandela's conquest of the hearts of white South Africa". He says this book is about how Mandela, having won over his own people, then went out and won over the people who had

applauded his imprisonment, who had wanted him dead – in short, the enemy.



**Heartfruit, by Ingrid Wolfaardt (Human & Rousseau):**

Isak is rooted in the landscape of the Cape, land of wide expanses, mountains and kestrels. He longs for the day when he will inherit the family fruit farm. But when it comes, South Africa is in transition and life on the old farm will never be the same. He has to work out a way of going on when everything else has changed. His wife, Amelie, has her own dark battles to fight, mainly within her own home. *Heartfruit* is described as "as much a sweeping family saga as a revisionist farm

novel".

# Sprawling novel of love, war and land

29/10/08

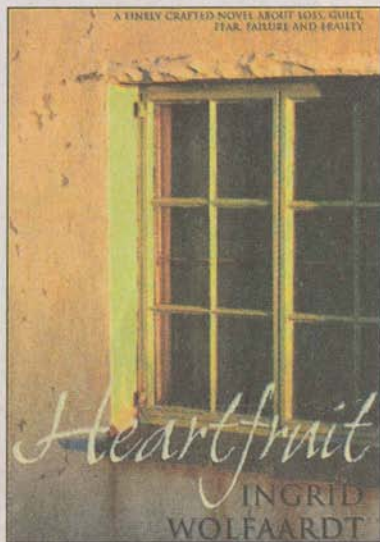
## BOOK REVIEW:

Heartfruit  
Ingrid Wolfaardt  
Human and Rousseau

Ingrid Wolfaardt's first novel is another product of UCT's Masters in Creative Writing course. She has created a sprawling novel which deals with a family who are trying to run a fruit farm in the Western Cape.

Isak Minnaar is the main protagonist. As a child he watches the unhealthy dynamics between his mother and father. He also becomes aware of the unequal relationship between his father and the other farmers with the "volk". When he is conscripted into the South African Defence Force, he becomes part of the unthinking killing machine. He, unlike others, is aware of the emotional boundaries he's crossed as a result of his violent actions.

He returns to the farm and has a brief sojourn at university. His inability to reintegrate with the community keeps him aloof from others, but he is drawn to Amelie, a fellow student at university. She is the only person who challenges his perceptions about himself as well as the status quo on his farm. His love for her forces him to reassess his ingrained beliefs of entitlement. The bigger political changes in the coun-



try impel him and the farming community into the new South Africa and he is forced to deal with the crippling effects of his years in the SADF.

Wolfaardt writes well with a creative eye for detail. I did question why she chose to change the narrative voice of Isak's to that of Amelie's only near the end of the book, though. It seemed a bit late to introduce a new convention. However, the book is a compelling read about our recent South African past as well as the incredible hardships faced by the farmers in their battle against the forces of nature.

Janet van Eeden

# REVIEW

## HEARTFRUIT

by Ingrid Wolfaardt (Human & Rousseau, 2008)

### JANE ROSENTHAL

This highly readable farm saga is set in the fruit farming area of the Western Cape and extends through three generations. It bears certain similarities to *Agaat* by Marlene van Niekerk in that the main protagonist, Isak Minaar, is confined to bed and it deals minutely with relationships on the farm, both between family members and between farmers and "volk". The author clearly knows her oats when it comes to farming and she knows farming communities and politics as well.

Ingrid Wolfaardt says it took her a long time to finish. It certainly shows a labour of love in its careful execution, with some wonderfully drawn portraits. In that of Minaar the author explores in some detail what went into a boy's education, or the making of a man, in the years after the Nationalists came into power.

A gang of young playmates on the farm included both white and coloured kids, but as they grew older things changed. Isak was sent off to boarding school where a talent for rugby protected him, but also began the process of hardening. This was continued in the army and by the time he came back to look after the farm he was as

*hardegat* as anyone could be. This war experience haunts Isak for the rest of his life.

The background of local politics explores a mostly forgotten era. The farm has a tradition of humane treatment of its workers, and Isak's parents were *Bloedsappe*, which is to say they voted for Jan Smuts. When

the Nats came in and the agricultural marketing boards were established, as well as the co-ops, the Minaars were systematically victimised by petty agricultural bureaucrats until the farm's prosperity declined.

Then after 1994 and the upheavals in the farming world, Isak goes to France to re-establish old marketing links there. He has a near-fatal accident and is suddenly

entirely powerless. Women and the young politicised coloured people on the farm are ready to take up the reins, but it seems that it is his weakness that has permitted Isak to go along with this.

This novel reads well; Wolfaardt easily manages the transitions from Isak's flashbacks to the hospital bed in France. As in Pauline Smith's *The Beadle* we have an English novel that feels or reads like Afrikaans; it is an interesting experience, and a happy revival of the past as one can imagine that old *Bloedsappe* would be truly bilingual, to the extent that the languages were not really separated in the mind. There are many Afrikaans words left just as they are: "volk", meaning coloured farm staff, and "Ouma's skatlam". *Heartfruit* itself is an Afrikaans way of combining two English words.



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## Ingrid Wolfaardt's *Heartfruit*: "The land is not his land"

Karen Jennings

2008-10-14 [Druk dit/Print it](#) [E-pos hierdie skakel/E-mail this link](#)Title: *Heartfruit*

Author: Ingrid Wolfaardt

Publisher: Human &amp; Rousseau

ISBN: 9780798149938

Pages: 456

[Click here to buy Heartfruit from Kalahari.net now!](#)

The twentieth century is considered by many to be the most terrible century in Western history. Categorised by the overwhelming presence of the will to dominate and dispossess, it is a century marked by war and violence, poverty and displacement, on a scale previously unknown. While it is Europe that suffered most during both the period that spans the two world wars and the troubles which have arisen over subsequent decades, South Africa has not been exempt from its share of hostilities. For South Africa the twentieth century was ushered in by the Boer War, a fight for land and power. Relatively shortly thereafter we took our place in the world wars, followed by the violence and brutality under apartheid, through the 1940s and into the 1990s, and the Border War with Angola in the 1970s.

It is this theme of violence, of a striving for power over land and people, which forms the background of Ingrid Wolfaardt's debut novel, *Heartfruit*.

The novel opens with Isak Minnaar, owner of a Cape fruit farm, driving through France. The farm is struggling financially, and he has come to Europe in the hope of getting buyers for his produce. From the first line of the novel - "This land is not his land" - one of the major themes of the story is clear: the desire to possess the land. In France Isak makes a trip to the town of Perron, after which his grandfather had named the farm. Perron is known, along with the Somme, as one of the bloodiest killing fields of the First World War. In the Perron museum he sees photos of that period and he remarks, "This is Oupa's war. Thousands of lives for a metre of soil", a situation which one of the characters sums up succinctly as "Land, men killing men for land".

Having failed to find buyers, Isak's last resort is to go to the Netherlands to visit his brother, Danie, whom he hasn't seen for years. While there he has an accident and is hospitalised with severe injuries. It is during the time that he is bed-ridden that the bulk of the narrative occurs - reminiscences of his life as a child, as a teenager, and as a young man - all of the major experiences of his life which have led him to this point.

As his past comes to the fore, the reader is given insight into the mind of a young boy who is faced with the difficulty of wishing to enforce his will over the "volk" that live on the farm, while, in fact, it is one of the "volk", Raatjie, his "kinnermeid", who means more to him than his own parents. Isak has a difficult relationship with his parents. His father has never recovered from the love he felt for a woman he met while fighting in Italy during the Second World War; consequently he has numerous affairs and drinks excessively. Isak's mother is depressive, self-involved and needy. The weakness of his parents is intolerable, adding to his desire to be strong. Isak's yearning for mastery and power is not limited to his interactions with the "volk", but extends to his bullying and mistreatment of his younger, weaker brother.

After a successful high school career as a star rugby player, Isak is called up for military service. Once his training is completed, he is sent to fight in the Border War. It is war that gives him the sense of power which he has been seeking in his life. Only years later does he realise, with shame, that war does not, in fact, make you a man; rather, "an unjust war makes a soldier

into a killer." Lying in his hospital bed, Isak wonders, "What horrors has he seen? Can a man ever be the same after war? Can he ever live without fear? Can he ever live without guilt?"

For Isak the war is not over, he cannot escape it. He sees war everywhere: "The fighting never stops. The fighting is in the streets and the fighting is in the boardrooms. The fighting is with guns and the fighting is with fruit, with each other and with yourself, you can't get away from it."

The same will to dominate which has marred interactions throughout his life, is evident in his relationship with Amelie, the woman he marries. Unwilling to allow himself the weakness of love, Isak steadily withdraws his affection from her, as this, he believes, is a "subtler, more powerful tool of domination". Removed from relationships based on reciprocal love and respect, Isak is denied happiness in his life.

In the end, as Isak recovers in the hospital, having remembered his past, having seen and learnt through the memory of events, he realises that the land is not his land, it can never be his land; no matter how strong the urge to possess, it is not possible to own land or people. It is only once Isak has understood this that he will be able to learn to live without guilt and fear, and embrace the possibility of happiness.

Ingrid Wolfaardt writes with clarity of voice and with a careful understanding of the emotions of her characters. She successfully immerses the reader in the lives of her characters, their environment, and their situations. It is without difficulty that I number her among the better class of writer currently being published in South Africa, and I would recommend her novel to anyone wishing to be published, for it is this standard of writing which is needed in South Africa.

However, it was with disappointment that I noted the numerous typographical errors which riddle the text ("closest" for "closet", "Klu Klux Klan" for "Ku Klux Klan", "quiten" for "quieten", "accept" for "except", "too" for "to", to list a few). My disappointment regarding this is twofold. Firstly, there has been a boom in publishing in South Africa over the past few years. Many new publishing houses are printing books that are well-presented and carefully proofed. I am surprised that an established publishing house like Human & Rousseau would not have been more careful in their proofreading. If they wish to maintain their position as one of the leading publishing houses they will need to step up their game. Secondly, this novel took six years to write and was rewritten numerous times; it was carefully researched and shows a genuine respect for the subject matter. It feels like an insult to the author's commitment to have the text marred by so many unnecessary errors.

Having said that, I would like to reinforce the fact that I believe Ingrid Wolfaardt is an author of whom we can have high expectations, and I look forward with interest to her next novel.