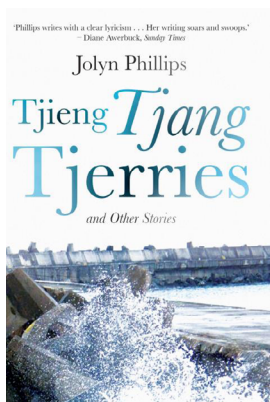


Book review

Tjieng Tjang Tjerries and Other Stories

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Jolyn Phillips

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Tjieng Tjang Tjerries and Other Stories

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Tjieng, Tjang, Tjerries is a collection of thirteen (13) short stories set in Gansbaai, a working-class fishing town in the Western Cape, South Africa. Jolyn Phillips covers the stories of many of its residents. Phillips paints a colourful picture of the residents in the town and the issues that occupy their attention. She stays true to the characters of the town representing them as they are, warts and all. For all this, she handles her characters with care, and even affection. She stays true even to the mix of English and Afrikaans spoken in the town, and code-switches from one language to the other regularly and unapologetically so. The stories in turn cover issues concerning domestic violence, drug abuse, poverty, mental health issues and religion, amongst others. While these are commonplace in many South African communities like Gansbaai, Phillips' stories also, perhaps importantly, focus on interactions between families and amongst the community members, social attitudes towards each other, family secrets, taboos, colorism, death, town life/the geography of the town (the sea) that are peculiar to the town and to coloured people.

In the opening story, 'Photograph', Phillips tackles the death of a son/brother, and the grief that is left unsaid between the remaining family members, a mother and daughter. The character Jonie (full name Felicity Gibson) feels "bad for hating my brother for dying" and throughout the story contends with these mixed feelings the grief brings up. She narrates how she first understood that her brother had died by the gathering of neighbours in her yard where they gave her an "I'm sorry look but no one said a thing" and how she henceforth felt forgotten by her mother, who was overcome with grief. Ten years on, when she arrives home from university, Jonie still felt forgotten by her mother. She no longer recognizes her mother, nor the house she once called home as it "no longer smells like Jik and washing powder. The walls have turned yellow from all the cigarette smoke and the white ceilings are filled with specks of mould." Her mother has become neglectful of the house and her body; she is irritable towards her and Jonie in turn is resentful that she has lived in the shadow of her brother, both when he was alive and since his passing. Yet, they find a moment of closeness in looking at a photograph of their family and recalling the memories of those that have since passed.

In the story from which the title of the book is taken, "The Legend of Tjieng Tjang Tjerries", Phillips tackles the effects of mental health issues, alcoholism and childhood neglect. Skerul, the main character, begins his life with his mother having attempted to abort him by overdosing on pills, resulting in his birth with developmental issues. He is taken care of by his extended family who while capable of providing for his physical care, do not understand his developmental impediments and even exacerbate them by their emotional neglect of him. He is introduced to alcohol by his Uncle Bos whom he is fond of, "when the hair started growing on his face". This coincides with his first meeting with Mr Wong, an imaginary character who signals the beginning of Skerul's mental health

decline. He experiences sensations of bees buzzing in his head, struggles with routine memorisation at school, suffers humiliation from teachers and peers on account of this and lands up in hospital following what can be presumed to be a seizure or blackout from mental stress. He creates and befriends the imaginary character of Mr Wong as a result of this, who teaches him Japanese and offers him all sorts of concoctions to consume. So severe are his mental health problems, his Uncle finds him inebriated and almost drowned at sea.

In her short stories, Phillips foregrounds the coloured community of Gansbaai in the telling of many typical and delightful stories about their ordinary lives. She shows the reader that this community is like many others, concerned with individual and group survival, and experiences the joys and pains of life; even as they struggle with broader socio-political issues that plague them. In doing so, she helps the reader to see their world through their eyes, writing this forgotten community back in to the South African fold.

Phillips is a keen observer of her people and their experiences as they struggle and travail through their lives without being overly romantic or patronizing. Phillips casts her gaze at a diversity of characters within this community – men, women, children, the old, the young, the mentally unwell - and critically, sees from all of their perspectives how the broader social world affects them. This in turn provides the reader with a good general grasp of this community from both the individual and group perspective.

Phillips strongly weaves Afrikaans into her stories, speaking in the ways in which the people in Gansbaai speak. Instead of translating her people, their language and their experiences in order to comfort the English gaze/reader; she instead requires the reader to understand these people and their community away from the western lens/gaze and requires that they are understood on their own terms. The language itself can be seen as a character, as can the geography of Gansbaai, as much is set against this working class town.

Per the format, the stories are short and easy to read as single stories. As a collection of stories they make real a particular place, people and time. The stories themselves are rather short, and could do with more character and plot development. This is often the limitation of short stories – just as they begin, they end, and one does not benefit from enjoying the story in full. It is the sincere view of the reviewer that there is potential to develop these stories further, whether into a broader short story format; or into a bona fide novel centering on Gansbaai and its coloured community. A defter hand would have weaved the common themes throughout the stories, that of place (Gansbaai), language (English/Afrikaans) and time (post-apartheid South Africa) with an even greater expounding of the geography of the area, and the effects of socio-political dynamics. But Phillip's is an admirable first effort nevertheless and makes the adage "giving voice to the voiceless" ring true.