



BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: HIDDEN STORIES AND *THE HIDDEN STAR*

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ABSTRACT

K. Sello Duiker's *The hidden star* was published posthumously in 2006 and met with mixed critical reactions. In this article I argue that Duiker's achievement in this novel has yet to be fully recognized and appreciated. Ironically, this fantasy for younger readers has been dismissed both as an unsuitably long fairy tale and a novel too disturbingly adult to be suitable for children. It is possible that the level of critical confusion generated by the work is because it is a rare South African example of what Brian Attebery refers to as 'indigenous fantasy' (1992:129), that is, fantasy that, like an indigenous species, is adapted to and reflective of its own native environment.

I also suggest that there is an unfortunate tendency among South African adults to dismiss all fantasy as unhealthy escapism rather than acknowledging that good fantasy is often a convenient vehicle for encouraging readers to explore and question the norms of a less-than-ideal consensus reality. This assertion is supported by a detailed discussion of the novel in which it is shown that Duiker's magical realism humorously confronts vital issues for young South Africans including the relationship between indigenous and colonial cultures, gender issues, coming of age, multiculturalism, the proper treatment of animals and, more mundanely, how to deal with bullies who steal one's sandwiches.

KEYWORDS

indigenous fantasy, South African magical realism, contemporary youth fiction, *sangomas*, healers

In Salman Rushdie's fantasy *Haroun and the sea of stories*, the young protagonist visits the Ocean of the Streams of Story and sees that it is made up of 'a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another, like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity' (1990:72). Iff, his water genie guide, then explains that, because the stories are held there in fluid form, they retain the ability 'to change, to become new versions of themselves, to join up with other stories and so become yet other stories' (1990:72). Rushdie is, of course, using his ocean as a metaphor for the sources that feed the creative imagination but his description might, just as validly, be applied to the process of reading a single story, since narrative itself, far from being fixed or monolithic, is both created and interpreted by the shifting currents and perspectives of complex human experience. Every book thus contains within its covers not only the master narrative that it overtly communicates but also a host of hidden narratives, which may shape and illuminate the reader's experience in subtle and even ambivalent ways.

K. Sello Duiker's *The hidden star*, for instance, details the adventures of eleven-year-old Nolitye, whose name means Keeper of the Stone (2006:5). Appropriately enough, Nolitye collects pebbles and keeps them in an enamel bucket under her bed. One lunch break she finds a stone that seems to shine with a purplish light and which unexpectedly and inexplicably fills her with mysterious joy. She later learns that her stone is a fragment of a greater whole created at the dawn of time by Nkulukulu of the heavens as a way of channelling wisdom to the tribes. Nomakhosi, the spirit of the stone, also tells Nolitye that she has been chosen to find and reunite the remaining pieces of the stone so that Ncitiwane, the unmaker, an elemental force of division and destruction, will lose his power and harmony and prosperity will be restored to the land (2006:83-4).

On the face of it, Duiker's novel reads like a fairy tale and, indeed, the book is full of references to the familiar motifs of both European fairy tales and southern African *ntsomi*. Yet Nolitye does not live 'once upon a time in a country far away' but here and now in Phola, an informal settlement on the fringes of Johannesburg and Duiker's vivid descriptions make this abundantly clear as when Nolitye and her friend Bheki walk through the township passing a group of elderly men drinking commercially brewed *umqombothi* or sorghum beer from cartons, a seller of roasted *mielies*, a travelling barber plying his trade on the pavement and three minibus taxis being 'vigorously washed from their wheel caps to their rooftops' (2006:63).

Despite these vibrant surroundings, Nolitye remains, both socially and economically, a marginalized child. Her urban environment has separated her from her cultural heritage so that when, at one stage, she is told to follow the Healer of the Road who will lead her to where she needs to go, she is completely baffled.

“The healer of the Road?”

Noka, looking incredulous, says, “My, my, you didn’t know? It is Nqonqothwane, of course. Dung beetle is the Healer of the Road.”

Thembi apologetically pulls up her shoulders and explains: “She grew up in a township.”

“I can’t believe there are places where children grow up without knowledge of the Healer of the Road,” Noka says. “But never mind. All the better that you have learned something new, child. The road holds many lessons” (2006: 212).

Similarly, the abject poverty in which Nolitye and her mother live prevents her from full assimilation into the rationalist contemporary world represented by the Mathematics homework she so much enjoys, but is regularly forced to leave incomplete when her precious stub of candle burns out (2006:12).

As the story unfolds, Nolitye learns that she is descended from a long line of *sangomas* or healers. Gradually as she encounters and overcomes magical enemies as divergent as a *Zim*, a cannibal with a scythe-like nail on the little finger of his right hand, a red-tongued *Imvuvu*, a threatening chimera, and various terrifying *umthakathis* or witches, she comes to understand Ntate Matthews’s explanation for why her father turned his back on family tradition by refusing to become a *sangoma*:

“What I do know is that your father had the makings of a healer. He definitely had the calling; he just refused to become a sangoma. I suspect that he knew that he was blessed with immense powers, and maybe he feared using them.”

Nolitye moved closer to Ntate Matthews. “But what was there to fear?”

“Answering the calling to be a healer is not that simple my child. There are a lot of evil forces – witches and wizards – out there that try to harm those who want to help people.” (2006: 39)

The novel clearly affirms the principle of free choice while also suggesting that choices do have to be made, since those who try to work with both the forces of the light and those of darkness inevitably become disempowered Renegades who ‘walk the thin line between light and dark, good and evil’ (2006: 102). Everything a Renegade does has to be carefully judged so that the opposing forces governing human life remain in balance. Such neutrality is not only almost impossible to achieve but leaves the Renegade powerless to effect any real change in the world.

Interestingly, throughout the first half of the novel, Nolitye assumes that her father has died in a mining accident but later learns that witches have imprisoned him below ground. At some level, his refusal to develop his hereditary powers seems to have led to his entombment within the earth and thus to a state of spiritual paralysis equitable with death. To some extent, it thus seems feasible to argue that Nolitye’s father stands for a lost generation subjected to a form of cultural amputation resulting from a comprehensive process of colonial subjugation.

Certainly, Duiker never glosses over the social and economic legacies of apartheid. Nolitye sometimes only has hot sugar water for breakfast, shares 'five mobile toilets with two hundred other people in her area' (2006:22) and knows just what to do, with the resignation born of long experience, when one of the tightly-packed shanties 'catches fire because a Primus stove tips over by accident, or a burning candle sets a tablecloth or curtain alight'" (2006:133). Interestingly though, white South Africans are entirely absent from Nolitye's world. This lacuna subtly emphasizes the way in which, even twelve years after South Africa's first democratic elections, the lives of the inhabitants of Phola continue to be firmly distanced from those of apartheid's prime beneficiaries, but, by this telling omission, Duiker also manages to suggest that the responsibility for redeeming the future lies unequivocally in the hands of apartheid's most obvious victims.

More radically, Duiker seems to imply that spiritual wholeness must precede and will always outweigh material well-being. Unlike the Hansels and Gretels (Opie, 1974:319) or Matongs (Savory, 1982:37) of fairy tales, Nolitye returns home at the end of the book bearing neither a witch's treasure nor a magical hide capable of generating material wealth. Instead, she finds a spiritual guide in Nomakhosi, who appears variously dressed in 'the black-braided white skirt and wrap of a Xhosa woman' (2006:82), 'a fiery Xhosa skirt with thin bands of black binding round the bottom' (2006:100), the sparkling beads and bright cotton of the Swazis (2006:98) and the traditional blue-and-red-striped skirt of the Shangaans (2006: 185). Led by this multicultural icon, Nolitye revisits South Africa's lost sea of *ntsomi* and grows spiritually by learning that she should not be fooled by what she thinks she sees (2006:185) because, as her father reminds her, dreams are not merely the products of randomly firing synapses but 'doors to the future' and sometimes 'more real than life' (2006:16). Significantly, it is only when Nolitye has managed to outgrow Vundla, the hare's contemptuous dismissal of her as a 'city slicker' cut off from her ancestral roots (2006:191) that she is able to reclaim her marginalized and rejected cultural heritage, redeem her imprisoned parents and replace the fear and despair that stalk the alleys of Phola with the hope and optimism its inhabitants so desperately need.

In the light of Duiker's use of *The hidden star* to affirm the power of indigenous myth, which is too often, as Cicely van Straten's research has shown, treated with impatient indifference or dismissively labeled as 'childish or primitive' by urban Africans (1996:44), it is noteworthy that he also uses Nolitye's quest to reaffirm the value of feminine principles. Duiker's decision to centre his novel on a girl child is particularly significant in a context in which, as Van Wyk Smith reminds us, the colonial discourse of domination ensures that 'land, indigene and woman are so often transformations of one another' (1990:55). In this context then Nolitye's name gains yet another layer of

significance since it evokes memories of the great women's march against the extension of the pass laws in 1956. As the women marched together to the Union Buildings, they sang a traditional song *Wathint' abafazi; wathint' imbokodo* [You strike the women; you strike the rock]. This powerful image of resistance is quite deliberately invoked in the opening chapter of *The hidden star* when Nolitye's annoyed mother wonders why the child's grandmother gave her such a stupid name and Nolitye defiantly replies, 'My name is not stupid. Gogo said: you mess with a woman, you mess with a stone' (2006:5-6).

Rocks are traditional emblems of strength but also of self-regarding ambition as Blake reminds us when, in 'The clod and the pebble', he has his pebble sing (ll.9-12):

"Love seeketh only self to please,
To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heavens despite." (In Ferguson et al. 2005:742)

By contrast Nolitye affirms the clod's credo and gives her ease for others with an unflinching resolution that firmly asserts that self-abnegation and nurturing, so often associated with the weaker sex, have, in fact, absolutely nothing to do with weakness.

In an inversion of patterns visible in works as otherwise disparate as Enid Blyton's Famous Five series and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, Nolitye's strength constantly buoys the spirits of her two male companions: Bheki, who is plump and unashamedly greedy, and Four Eyes, whose nickname is derived from his grimy spectacles. Indeed, at the start of the novel, Four Eyes is utterly subordinate to Nolitye's chief tormentor, the school bully, Rotten Nellie. The way in which Four Eyes subsequently transfers his allegiance seems to bear out Nomakhosi's weary observation that 'boys and men are like water. They go everywhere and anywhere because that is their spirit' (2006:55).

In some ways the struggle between Nolitye and Rotten Nellie may be said to evoke a struggle between two diametrically opposed definitions of female power. Nellie is 'the only girl in the school who refuses to wear a gym dress like the other girls. She insists on wearing a shirt and shorts like the boys. Even her school shoes are meant for boys.' (2006:24). Bheki is afraid of her because he once saw her punch a grade-seven boy in the face and when the boy's nose started bleeding Rotten Nellie 'bellowed with laughter' (2006:24) as if it were the funniest thing she had ever seen. Rotten Nellie has thus achieved her dominant position within the school hierarchy by denying her own femininity and modelling her actions on those more usually associated with the successful male. For instance, when Nolitye suggests at one point that ladies should go first, Rotten Nellie responds with characteristic vigour saying, "'Oh, shut up with the lady stuff!'" and asking angrily, "'Do I in any case look like a lady?'" (2006:67).

Nellie also regularly refers to Nolitye, who wears her hair in dreadlocks, as Mop. This slur not only implies that Nolitye's distinctively African hair is seen as dirty or untidy but that Nolitye herself is considered a devalued object linked to female domestic subjugation. Importantly, Nolitye never retaliates in kind but instead persistently appeals to Nellie's better nature. Her calm patience is finally rewarded when Nellie unexpectedly gives her the last piece of the stone rather than allow it to fall into the hands of MaMtonga, Ncйтjana's agent. Nellie makes it clear that she is doing this out of altruism and a desire to protect the children of Phola, but, sadly, even at this crucial juncture, she remains embarrassed about rather than proud of her own nurturing impulse saying, 'If you tell anyone about this it's off. This is our secret. Okay?' (2006:180)

Nolitye, by contrast, is always willing to show love and care to those who need it. The first use to which she puts the stone is to refill the bucket of *vetkoek* [fat cakes] that her mother has asked her to sell at the bus station. The implied analogy with the Christian miracle of the loaves and the fishes may not have been intentional but Duiker's education at a Catholic school (Dorado, 2006:s.p.) means that he would have been familiar with Christian tropes and the links to the Christian paradigm of redemptive love certainly seem to continue when Nolitye goes on to use the stone to bring Rex, the leader of a pack of stray dogs, back from the verge of death.

Before their very eyes the wound starts closing up. A small trail of smoke floats up into the air. Bheki clutches at Nolitye's arm. The wound keeps shrinking until there is only a scar left. But even the scar soon disappears as the fur grows back. Rex shakes his head and slowly gets up. He wags his tail, wobbly on his feet at first, but he stretches and soon regains his balance. Then he gives a hearty sneeze. Nolitye and Bheki laugh nervously.

'Rex you're back!' Bheki shouts.

Rex answers with a loud bark. "Thanks guys. I thought I was a goner." (2006:66)

The Phola animals, whose speech Nolitye is able to understand, seem to form a subordinate group within the township and are regularly beaten and abused by the humans around them. By treating them with care and respect, Nolitye presents readers with an alternative model of power relations whereby love and concern displace exploitation and coercive violence. It is no accident that Nolitye gains the penultimate piece of the stone from a German shepherd, Mister, who may be chained into physical submission but who, nevertheless, refuses to adopt a subservient role in his interaction with the children who are initially annoyed by the fact that, despite his subordinate position, 'he behaves as if he is a big chief' (2006: 167). Mister's insistence on maintaining some dignity is also made very clear when he refers to himself with conscious irony as a 'so-called dog' (2006:171) thus wittily undermining the system of racial classification still firmly embedded in the South African consciousness.

In order to get the precious fragment that he guards so ferociously, Nolitye has to overcome her fear and, in a gentle homage to the fable of Androcles and the lion, draw the thorn from his inflamed paw. Towards the end of the novel, Aesop is also invoked when Nolitye challenges Vundla, the hare, to a race. Nolitye wins the race by trickery but in this, as in all her interactions with animals, she alerts the reader to the fact that, as Swinfen observes, 'the animal fantasy helps to remind us that we are, after all, only dressed animals, shielded by a few flimsy mechanical devices from the often harsh, but more natural life of our cousins' (1984:43).

Brian Attebery argues that both a strength and a weakness of fantasy is its reliance on traditional storytelling forms and motifs. By making its conventional basis explicit and primary, rather than submerging tale types or character functions beneath a surface of apparent reported reality, Attebery suggests that fantasy is 'empowered to reimagine both character and story'. However, he also goes on to warn that such 'a willingness to return to the narrative structures of the past can entail as well an unquestioning acceptance of its social structures' (1992:87). This danger is particularly evident when the work of fantasy is about a process of coming of age and thus, of necessity, should look to the future rather than the past.

Coming of age is, of course, a motif central to many fantasies since the tale of a young hero's 'displacement, transformation and return' is, as Attebery also points out, 'the fundamental pattern of both the hero monomyth, as described by Joseph Campbell, and of the fairy tale as analyzed by Vladimir Propp' (1992: 87). The pattern identified above is thus reproduced in almost all modern fantasies as characters move from childhood and a state of fluid potential towards the achievement of individuation and relatively stable adult identity. Nolitye in *The hidden star* undergoes just such a process but Duiker is careful to endorse past norms only when these are empowering for his heroine as is, perhaps, most clearly seen in his treatment of gender issues.

A problem that is particularly acute for those writers conscious of gender stereotyping is that traditional rites of passage are often focused on the achievement of manhood rather than the subtler and perhaps more complex processes attendant on the achievement of womanhood. In considering this issue, Attebery proposes that the story of female coming of age may revolve around the search for an acceptable maternal model since, if women are not simply to reproduce the lives of their mothers, they need to add to their inherent knowledge of continuity, duty and the submersion of the self the knowledge of individuality and rebellion (1992:100).

Eleven-year-old Nolitye is on the cusp of puberty as the novel begins but her relative immaturity is evidenced by the extent to which her mother, Thembi, still governs her life. So, at the end of each day Nolitye snuggles in to Thembi in their shared single

bed forming an archetypal image of the mother/ child dyad (2006:13). However, when Nolitye finds the heart of the stone, she also finds Nomakhosi, who challenges her to step away from her mother's protection by providing her for the first time with an affirming adult role model, who is, as she herself affirms, 'the Spirit of Women's Strength' (2006: 82). Nomakhosi is not worn down by poverty like Thembi, consumed by ambition and malevolence like the sorceress MaMtonga or denatured by her collusion with an imposed education system like Nolitye's teacher, the aptly named Moeder. As Nolitye draws away from Thembi, she recovers contact with her father who tells her that the woman whom she has believed to be her mother is, in reality, an *umthakathi* or witch who has simply taken on Thembi's outer form. This impostor is shown to be in collusion with MaMtonga who desires Nolitye's stone for herself. Ma Mtonga's menace is heightened by both her association with snakes and the hints that she may be a cannibal. When Nolitye follows her down to the river of black water one night, for instance, she is horrified when MaMtonga claims to be able to smell young flesh and licks her lips as if she would like to eat it (2006: 151). One is reminded of the greedy witch in 'Hansel and Gretel' who, as Bettelheim has observed, represents total surrender to untamed id impulses and self-preoccupied greed (1976:163). MaMtonga thus stands in opposition to the values of both love and *ubuntu* each of which Nolitye consistently affirms.

In her encounters with a range of deceptive maternal role models, Duiker thus allows Nolitye to use the traditional distancing methods of fairy tale whereby negative and positive maternal attributes are displaced and given to either a magical godmother or a threatening hag (whether witch, wicked stepmother or both). By being told that Thembi is not her real mother, Nolitye is able to assert her independence without taking on a crippling burden of guilt. The increasingly tenuous links between Nolitye and the undesirable mother whom Thembi has come to represent are finally severed when the girl learns the interloper's true name, Sylvia. In this context, it seems entirely appropriate that the deceiving *uthakathi's* real name should not be an indigenous one since the novel repeatedly confirms the value of cultural as well as personal integrity.

Before she can regain contact with her true mother, Nolitye has to descend into Ncitjane's underworld. Significantly, Nomakhosi cannot accompany her on this part of her journey so that Nolitye is forced to rely on her own resources and learn to trust in her own capacity for independent action. This descent also clearly leads Nolitye into a variant of what Northrop Frye calls the 'night world, often a dark and labyrinthine world of caves and shadows where the forest has turned subterranean, and where we are surrounded by the shapes of animals.' If the meandering and descent patterns of Paleolithic caves, along with the paintings on their walls, have anything like the same kind of significance, Frye argues, 'we are here retracing what are, so far as we know, the oldest imaginative steps of humanity' (1976: 111-112).

In this terrifying domain given over to all the archetypes of southern African folklore, Nolitye is encouraged by Mvu, the hippo, to dive to the very bottom of a river. Here she meets an old and horribly disfigured woman.

“I know I am ugly and old, my child,” she says. “You may laugh. I will not blame you.”

“Dumela, Mama,” Nolitye answers. “How can I laugh when my heart goes out to you?”

“If the sight of me doesn’t put you off, my child, then let the balm of your kind healing tongue heal me by licking my wounds,” the old woman says (2006:207).

Nolitye doesn’t hesitate to do what the hideous crone asks. The old woman starts shivering and shaking and Nolitye watches as she grow an arm and then a leg while her face takes on a youthful beauty and an elaborately patterned woollen Basotho blanket covers her body.

This episode seems to allude to a traditional Zulu tale ‘*Umamba Kamaquba*’ in which a young girl sets out on a journey to marry Mamba of Maquba. On the way she meets an old woman with crusted eyes. The hag asks the girl to lick the pus from her eyes and, after she has compassionately done so, the old woman tells her that her husband-to-be has taken the form of a snake and how to restore him to himself again (Msimang, 1986:259).

In another sense, however, Nolitye reverses the age-old process whereby mammal mothers clean the afterbirth from their offspring thereby ‘licking them into shape’. Nolitye thus uses her tongue to cleanse and reveal and by so doing regains not only her real mother but also her own true self. Her new independence and maturity are then highlighted by the way in which, as she begins her return to the upper world, an ascent which Frye would assert mirrors ‘the creative power in man that is returning to its original awareness (1976:157), she stretches out her hand to Thembi, who ‘approaches nervously, following her daughter’s lead’ (2006:212).

After emerging from the river, Nolitye is forced to journey to the elephants’ graveyard in search of her father who is imprisoned in a giant baobab. In this place of death where nothing grows and the smell of rotting carcasses ‘hangs in the air’ (2006: 225), Nolitye affirms life by mixing water and clay, the biblical first components of life as well as the traditional building material of the Nguni people, and smearing them onto the baobab’s trunk from which her father gradually emerges ‘coming to life before their eyes’ (2006: 229).

The hidden star is clearly a work which, to use Attebery’s terminology, is a fully-realized indigenous fantasy, that is ‘a fantasy that is, like an indigenous species, adapted to and reflective of its native environment’ (1992:129). As such it is a relatively unusual phe-

nomenon in the world of contemporary South African children's books where African and pseudo-African folktales crowd the shelves for younger readers but fantasy for older readers is relatively thin on the ground. The public response to the novel hints at yet another hidden story as uncomfortable adult readers have clearly struggled to adjust to the new possibilities inherent in it. Albe Grobbelaar, for instance, clearly reveals his unease in a review for *Die Volksblad* in which he states:

My oorweldigende gevoel met die lees hiervan was dat dit 'n veel dunner kinderboekie moes gewees het met groot letters en pragtige volkleur-illustrasies van wrede hekse, blink toorklippies en boelies wat op hulle plek gesit word (2006:6).¹

Fred Khumalo, on the other hand, expresses what is probably a very similar uncertainty rather differently in a review for *The Sunday Times* in which he wonders if the novel's message may not be beyond its intended readers since, while it has a young protagonist, *The hidden star* 'like *Thirteen cents* before it, is so disturbingly adult in its message that I got goosebumps reading it' (2006:16).

Thirteen cents, Duiker's first novel, gives a brutally realistic picture of the lives of Cape Town's street children and was awarded the Commonwealth prize for a first novel in the Africa region after its publication in 2000. *The hidden star* was thus not the first book in which Duiker set out to explore the minds of children but it was his first book to be clearly aimed at younger readers and he admitted to finding this a challenge saying in an interview with Luvoya Kakaza, 'You must make it interesting and not preach down to them because they're not idiots. You're also competing with T.V., cell phones and Sony play stations. I welcome the challenges of making it relevant' (In Mayamane, 2005:24). It is significant that Duiker, known for his mastery of gritty realism should, like Ursula le Guin, have come to the realization that, it is primarily 'by such statements as, "once upon a time there was a dragon", or "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" – it is by such beautiful non-facts that we fantastic human beings may arrive, in our own peculiar fashion, at the truth' (1989: 33).

Interestingly, Nolitye is not only guided by her encounters with traditional spirits and a range of living beings but also by her experiences with the printed word. In the school's small library, she finds an old grey book without a classification number on its spine. When she opens it, she finds a small inscription in faded ink:

The journey starts with a single step. But you have to be curious to read on. Yes, you reader, standing there looking lost. But it is no surprise that you are reading these words....You are wondering
about something, which is why you are reading this book....This is the book of questions and answers. But you already know what you want to ask, which is why you are

1. My overwhelming feeling while reading this was that it should have been a much slimmer little children's book written in big letters and using attractive full-colour illustrations of cruel witches, shining magic stones and bullies being put in their places. [Translation mine.]

reading. In fact, the truth is that you already know the answer to your question – you just have to listen to yourself. (2006:129)

Nolitye's brief encounter with the book thus encourages her to believe that she is not alone in a meaningless universe but that all questions can be answered by simply becoming aware of one's own individual moral imperatives. The incident is wonderfully self-reflexive as Nolitye decodes the printed message of hope and then transmits it again through the medium of print to the long line of readers who peer anxiously over her fictional shoulder.

K. Sello Duiker committed suicide in January 2005 before his final novel had been published. Like the protagonist of his second novel, *The quiet violence of dreams* (2001), he constantly wrestled with both his own interior demons and the external pressures imposed by life in South Africa not least of which, in his own words, was 'what it means to be black and educated' (In Dunton, 2001:3).

I have touched on only a few of the hidden stories twining incessantly behind the golden dust jacket of *The hidden star*. They converge and diverge, jostle for attention or retreat before a critical eye. Yet in all their diversity it seems to me that they are united by a common feature; they all deal with people in liminal conditions facing perilous moments of formative stress. Nolitye, poised between childhood and adulthood, traditional beliefs and mathematical proofs, self-assertion and self-abnegation reflects a society poised between past and future, assimilation and disintegration. Like her creator, she finds herself caught between a rock, albeit a magical one, and a hard though beloved place.

However, unlike Duiker himself, she suggests to us the possibility that by active engagement with the forces of darkness, which in Kwena the crocodile's riddle are everywhere, hiding in every corner, 'even in places as big as a pea' (2006:209), one may find that the bars of one's cage are self-wrought. This possibility is amusingly demonstrated towards the end of the novel when Vundla, the tricky hare, first meets the children in Ncitiwane's kingdom and leads them into a low-hanging cave. Here he suddenly leaps forward and 'pushing hard with both front paws against the roof he pretends to hold it up. "Quick! Quick! The cave is falling in," he shouts, straining every muscle' (2006:193). The children rush to help him and he then asks them to continue supporting the overhang while he rescues his wife from the depths of the cavern. Finally, when the children's arms are weak with fatigue, they are forced to lower them only to find that the threatening weight of stone above them is, in fact, perfectly secure.

Throughout *The hidden star*, Duiker shows that fiction and life are complementary rather than opposed. As Attebery avers, 'they are enabling mechanisms, ways of evading the rational censor, so that our own tribal storytellers can resume their proper function,

reclaim their unique discourse, and recapture the modern world for the imagination (1992:141). Freed of 'mind-forged manacles' (Blake, in Ferguson et al., 2005:745), Nolitye finds that even the hardest stone may be an instrument of becoming, a conduit of meaning and a way of redeeming the bleakest of environments for, as Unqonqothwane, the Healer of the Road, returns the children to their world, they realize that

They've missed the township with its dusty streets. They've missed MaMokoena's spaza shop, the shebeens and other small corner stores with their dilapidated roofs, even Rotten Nellie and her gang, moaning Mandla, Rex and the rowdy stray dogs. They've missed the squeezed-in shacks that leave little space for anything else, and the train that makes the tracks hum as it passes by.

They've missed the township because it is home. And home is never far away when you believe in it (2006:233).

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