



Frankie and Stankie

Barbara Trapido

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Dinah and her sister Lisa are growing up in 1950s South Africa, where racial laws are tightening. They are two little girls from a dissenting liberal family. Big sister Lisa is strong and sensible, while Dinah is weedy and arty. At school, the sadistic Mrs Vaughan-Jones is providing instruction in mental arithmetic and racial prejudice. And then there's the puzzle of lunch break. 'Would you rather have a native girl or a koelie to make your sandwiches?' a first-year classmate asks. But Dinah doesn't know the answer, because it's her dad who makes her sandwiches. As the apparatus of repression rolls on, Dinah finds her own way. As we follow her journey through childhood and adolescence, we enter into one of the darker passages of twentieth-century history.

Frankie and Stankie Details

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From Reader Review Frankie and Stankie for online ebook

Sophie says

How have I not read this author before? Quirky captivating characters with enough historical context (50s South Africa) to inform but not bog you down. I preferred the earlier years describing schooldays and the various Best Friends. So clearly written it must surely be part autobiographical? I wish there was another volume about the next chapter of Dinah's life in England.

I'm off to rummage through boxes to find some of Trapido's other novels I'm sure I remember having somewhere! If not, it's off to Amazon I go!

Lyn says

If, by chance, you happened to go to school in South Africa during the fifties, sixties or seventies, then you should definitely read this book. Not only is Barbara Trapido a fantastic author (and check out all her other books too, most of which are set in England) but you will laugh aloud with recognition at the South African schooling system and the general white lifestyle of those days. (Hopefully it is all different now).

Set in Durban, this is a wonderfully insightful book into the highs and lows of life for pre and post WW2 emigrants to South Africa as they come to terms with the often crazy-making life in their new country. Told skillfully from both a child and teen perspective, and interwoven with back stories of immigrant parents, grandparents, neighbours and friends, this is a book well worth reading.

El says

This is not so much a novel as a fictionalised autobiography. It recounts the development of a young girl, Dinah, through the 50s and 60s, her childhood and adolescence. Born in South Africa, Dinah is aware of the system of apartheid that rules her homeland and the book shows her gradual - and very slow - realisation that she cannot accept that system. We follow her through her school and university years, meet a vast cast of characters which I found difficult to keep track of and learn of the dreadful, cruel and barbaric way non-white people were treated. Not having lived in such an environment I was appalled at times at the casual and sadistic racism portrayed in Frankie and Stankie. (The title refers to two children's clowns, attached in the middle, each with their head at opposite ends.)

I can see that this is a very informative and eye-opening work but I felt that the characters weren't developed fully so that I was never really engaged with them. I learned a great deal about apartheid but it was often related in a dry, history lesson manner which didn't engage me. I preferred the parts where we learned the truth through the characters' actions. There was also a lot of back story about the characters' ancestors which I found confusing. Dinah, the main character, is also weak, tending to react rather than act, and I felt that one of the other characters could have featured as the protagonist which would have made for a more interesting account.

Di says

Quite an interesting story set in South Africa during apartheid following the life of a two sisters as they grow from small girls through their school and university years. A commentary on the regime

Sarah says

Whilst this book was set in 1950's South Africa, it could so easily have described my own childhood in 1970's South Africa. So much resonated with me, such as the way history was taught in schools (regurgitate, never question), the inane school uniform rules, the social structures, the crazy politics, the contents of Die Huisgenoot, and those horribly painful Afrikaans lessons, liberal parents and night-time visits from the police. And the author's scathingly witty attacks on both the English and Afrikaans speaking whites provided cringeworthy accurate stereotypes (the teachers in their white safari suits!) that took me right back. Whilst this book represents only one small part of South Africa's story, it reflects a lot of my own experiences. When I look back now, I can't believe how much has changed in South Africa, but this book also made me think about how stagnant things were from the 1940's to the 1970's (outside the political arena, which was deteriorating fast). An interesting read!

Tony says

Story of growing up , white and middle-class, in 1950s South Africa. Supposedly a kind of memoir of BT's childhood/young adulthood. Set against significant social changes, growth of Afrikaans, stronger apartheid etc, the young girls' concerns seem ordinary and frequently reflect the lives of their contemporaries in UK. However, the book fails to deliver; though there are many amusing anecdotes and some potentially good characters, we never really get beyond this. It becomes a fractured series of vignettes that never really sharpen into a clear picture. The book feels like a reminiscence with little attempt to steer the narrative or provide an over-arching scheme beyond "growing up" (and she doesn't always stick to that).

Judy Cheney says

Interesting characters set in South Africa during the 1960s. Not being very familiar with the history, besides what is read from newsprint and TV, I am glad I did read it. Barbara's experiences are well told through her main character Didi. I can't imagine growing up in such a racist atmosphere. Where colour differences never existed, were forced onto those people who made the land and belonged there yet had to live like animals. Religion and politics are always at the source of negative impact and this book describes it well.

Kathleen Dixon says

A friend loaned me this book. She's from South Africa and I guess about 10 years younger than the girls in this novel - so, considering the many years of entrenched prejudice there, she lived through everything they did.

I found this book really interesting, but I didn't like it much as a novel. The writing style didn't connect with me, and I'm trying to analyse why. It's in the present tense all the way through, which shouldn't in itself be a problem as I've read and enjoyed other novels written in the present tense. This one moves over a period of some 20 or so years, and that shouldn't be a problem either, despite present tense all the way - after all, that's how we live our own lives. But perhaps that's the problem - our own lives are mostly pretty dull and wouldn't bear 70,000 words (or however many there are in this paperback), and though the times they live in are fascinating and the historical content and the appalling prejudice seen through the eyes of ordinary people are disturbing, there is (for me) simply too much of the daily detail.

I would have stopped reading this book part way through if it had not been about my friend's upbringing, as it were. Still, I can say I'm pleased I persevered (albeit very slowly).

Angel says

What a boring novel. Although meticulously researched the book lacked any depth and just seemed to be a 'story' of random people doing not very much. A real disappointment. And a plot would have been appreciated.

Faith says

This was exactly the right book for me! It's about Dinah, a girl growing up in South Africa in the 50s. A perfect mixture of Dinah's personal history and the history of South Africa of the time (with apartheid and everything).

As for the title Frankie & Stankie: It really is pretty random. It refers to an Italian song that Dinah misunderstood in her childhood. Can it get more random? Or maybe there is a point. Dinah thought that the song was about two clowns named Frankie and Stankie. Life is funny, life is random. That might be something. At least it suits the atmosphere of the book.

I really liked this book! And I dare say I learned something too. If you want to read about South Africa, choose this book, and not People Like Ourselves by Pamela Jooste.

Jodie (JCT) says

I found I made slow progress with this I really didn't enjoy it but yet something kept me reading till the end. I guess in the end you start to feel for Dinah and want to know what happens to her next as she grows.

What I found hard was the randomness of the book with it starting something then going on to something else then back to the original thing they were talking about I was left thinking why was that even put in that spot at all or even why at all.

So why give it 3* because although I may not have enjoyed reading it I feel like I've learned a lot reading it.

Lara says

I loved The Traveling Hornplayer by the same author so decided to try this novel despite the iffy title. I struggled to care about the characters, in part because there is no real dialogue- it's all descriptions of interactions. Is that 3rd-person limited narration? Anyway, stuck with it and it has some great moments so not sorry I did.

Biddy Soutar says

Bittersweet trip down memory lane for this ex_pat South Safrican reader.

Meg says

A high 3 star rating. Story of sisters living in South Africa and learning about Apartheid. I wish there was more information regarding Apartheid.

Jayne Bauling says

What a lovely writer Barbara Trapido is, always pitch-perfect. She has that gift of engaging the reader without anything huge or dramatic happening in the lives of her eminently credible characters.

Dinah de Bondt grows up in Durban during the decades when apartheid was at its crudest and most frighteningly repressive. The racism and vague liberal guilt and ineffectuality of the era are accurately rendered, as we follow Dinah through school and university and a series of best girlfriends before men enter her life.

Beautifully written.
